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# New Technologies of Democracy: How the Information and Communication Technologies are Shaping New Cultures of Radical Democratic Politics.

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Paul Stacey

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**ABSTRACT.**

What characterises contemporary democratic political struggles? According to the post-Marxist theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, it is their sheer *unknowability*: the fact that there can be no certainties, no fixed grounding. Drawing a distinction between the 'certainties' of classical Marxism (i.e. base/superstructure) and the more 'diffuse' nature of modern democratic demands (such as sexual and gender equality, environmentalism and the peace movements), the emergence of a post-Marxist perspective has endeavoured to engage the widening imaginaries of present-day democratic politics. In this thesis the central post-Marxist category of radical democracy, defined literally as the 'multiplication of public spaces of antagonism', is interrogated in relation to new modes and ideas of contemporary political struggle, particularly those associated with the expansion of the ICTs and networks. Arguing for the need to consider politics beyond the somewhat outmoded and uninspiring description of the 'new social movements', this thesis critically investigates the emerging practices of politics and activism enabled by the technologies like the Internet, using the ideas of post-Marxism as a basis for generating new theories of radical democracy. Looking in particular at the practices of Tactical Media and Culture Jamming, together with new methods of interaction and consumption, such as peer-to-peer file sharing and open publishing on the Internet, this study demonstrates how radical democracy contains as yet unthoughtout critical potentials through which to examine the ICTs in relation to these nascent cultures of politics. These emerging political cultures, this thesis suggests, entail the articulation of other ways of conceiving democracy, the political and politics more appropriate to the increasingly networked nature of contemporary society.



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## INTRODUCTION.

The continued proliferation of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and global networks are giving shape and mobility to new cultures of democratic politics. Digitally mediated information flows are extending the conditions for new ways of thinking about politics and democracy that both challenge and build on new and existing theoretical currents (Eschle and Maiguashca, 2005). Through an encounter of different theoretical perspectives, from international political economy, social movement theory and globalisation studies to political philosophy, cultural studies and postmodernism, this new *thinking* of politics is influencing emergent networks of democratic political struggle. The 'digital conditions' of these networks (hypertextuality, virtuality, unlimited reproduction and dissemination and so on) are functions that are at the disposal of potentially anyone who has access to networked ICTs like the Internet (Poster, 2005). The Internet is today seen as a radical stimulus for the mediation of emerging cultures of 'technopolitics' and 'cyberactivism', terms used to describe the profusion of new technologies that are engaged in political struggle (Meikle, 2002; McCaughey and Ayers, 2003). As a result, new kinds of political practice and activity are now developing as 'global networks of resistance' (Kingsnorth, 2003), such as the 'alternative globalisation movements', which first came to prominence in the north with the so-called anti-corporate/globalisation mobilisations in Seattle, Prague and Genoa (Mertes, 2003; Kiely, 2005). In addition, the development of new communicative practices, including email, listserves, blogging, vlogging (video blogs) and file sharing, may not only vastly expand those who may participate, but also interconnect 'humans' and 'machines' in new kinds of relations that owe more to decentralised networks than geographic proximity (Poster, 2001b). Debates continue to divide over the nature, effects and possibilities of a nascent 'technopolitics' (Armitage, 1999; Best and Kellner, 2001; Dean, 2002; Rheingold, 2003), but what can at least be said to bring them together is the need to examine seriously the unprecedented and unique properties of ICTs like the Internet as a driving force for a politics of the 'Information age'.

This thesis presents an analysis of these emerging paradigms of democratic political struggle and considers them from a critical perspective. Its principle concern is to investigate the way in which the proliferation of ICTs like the Internet may suggest new questions about the nature and character of contemporary cultures of democratic politics. The proposed approach is threefold. First, I draw



attention to the challenges posed by the ICTs to established theories of politics and democracy. Second, I consider what this might mean for our understanding of new democratic forms of politics and organisation taking shape today. And third, I show how *rethinking* traditional theories of politics and democracy will enable us both to account for, and generate new theorisations of, emerging modes of democratic political struggle. Through these areas of enquiry, major contests around contemporary issues of politics, technology and democracy, as well as our understanding of the shifting dimensions of these categories, are clarified.

In the post-Second World War epoch, modern western liberal democracies have witnessed a wealth of cultural and social transformations, including an emergent consumer culture, restructured gender relations, nascent forms of youth and social movements, new diasporas created by the post-colonial migrations, and a new and decisive form of individualism, at the centre of which stand new conceptions of the subject and its identity (Bocock & Thompson, 1992; S. Hall in Morley and Chen, 1996). These transformations have arguably added a new layer of social conflictuality to the myriad relations which are characteristic today of advanced capitalist societies (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, 1990).

For example, in their book *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy (HSS)* Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe show how the penetration of capitalist relations into evermore areas of society has initiated a new understanding of democratic politics and social struggle. On the one hand, they argue, this extension of capitalist relations has undermined the networks of traditional solidarity of the community, class or family type. But it has also given shape to numerous new struggles and relations that have expressed resistance against new forms of subordination in society (1985). In support of this thesis, Laclau and Mouffe put forward the following twofold claim. First they argue that the general 'urbanisation' that has accompanied economic growth – involving the transfer of the popular classes to the urban periphery or their relegation to decaying inner cities – and the general lack of collective provisions and services have initiated a new range of problems which affect the organisation of the whole of social life *outside* of work. And second they suggest that an important consequence of this is that the terrain of social relations from which contemporary antagonisms and struggles may emerge has multiplied: habitat, consumption, identity and new 'social rights' can constitute terrains for the struggles against inequalities and the claiming of new rights (1985: 161 – 2). Challenging the orthodox Marxist (base-superstructure) analysis, Laclau and Mouffe argue that the

proliferation of capitalist relations of production has in fact opened the ground for a range of new struggles against changes in the social relations generated by capitalism. Of particular note in their study were the new struggles for 'social rights' or 'positive liberties', which they argued profoundly modified the liberal-democratic discourse, redefining the categories of 'justice', 'liberty' and 'equality' by expanding and extending their sphere of influence in such areas as welfare rights, sexual equality, the rights of minorities, gay rights, consumer rights, and so forth. One consequence of this multiformity of struggles, Laclau and Mouffe suggested, was that it opened out the terrain which made *possible* a deepening of the egalitarian or democratic revolution (Ibid.: 166).

However, this same argument has been pursued rigorously by theorists on the political right. Their argument follows that the double movement of the transformation of social relations characteristic of the new hegemonic formation of the post-war period, and of the effects of the displacement into new areas of social life of the egalitarian imaginary, has provoked a 'democratic surge' which made society almost 'ungovernable'. The ever more frequent demands for real equality have led society, according to this analysis, to the edge of the 'egalitarian precipice'. In the mid 1970s, for example, Daniel Bell argued that this 'new egalitarianism' put in jeopardy the true ideal of equality, which for him was not an equality of results or equality between groups but a 'just meritocracy' (Bell, 1976). For Bell, this 'crisis of democracy' was viewed as the result of a 'crisis of values', the consequence of the development of an 'adversary culture' and of the 'cultural contradictions of capitalism' (1976b). This problem of the 'governability of democracy' is still prevalent in contemporary debates about social, economic and, increasingly, foreign policy. This is underlined, on a more extreme level, by the strength of a U.S neo-conservative foreign policy that emphasises military confrontation and 'nation-building' as the 'route to democratic freedoms', and a forthright moral imperative that increasingly advocates the canon of the Christian right on such issues as abortion rights, gay marriage and 'family values' as a means to remedy what they see as an expanding liberal social agenda (see Hamm, ed. 2005).

Democratic and political theory in Europe and in the United States has changed dramatically during the last few decades. On the political left positions like participatory democracy and Marxist approaches have lost some of their appeal, there has been a surge of interest in, for instance, Habermasian deliberative



democracy (1996), Rawlsian political liberalism (1996) and Anthony Giddens' 'The Third Way' (1998). What these models of democracy appear to offer is, in different ways, new approaches to thinking about the nascent conditions and political-economic circumstances in modern society. The central assertion of the cited approaches is, however, that the questions confronting liberal democracies today are both many and varied. Of particular interest for Jurgen Habermas is the way in which individualisation and the decline of traditional collective allegiances, including class, place and established religion are impacting on the role of democratic deliberation as a means of securing the legitimacy of legal norms in complex, pluralistic societies (1996). John Rawls, meanwhile is concerned to elaborate a modern theory of political justice through which to contend rising inequality and social fragmentation, arguing for the need to develop the idea of a 'social contract' that lays out the general principles that can and should be accepted by both liberal and non-liberal societies (1996). And Anthony Giddens' once influential 'The Third Way' makes the case for mitigating the less desirable nature of the capitalism – the increasing pressures of competition faced by domestic capital; the rising integration of global finance and trade, with consequences for global economic stability; the increase in size and influence of transnational corporations – in order to harness capitalism's capacity for good, for the betterment of all of humanity and the modernisation of social democracy (1998, 2003). In their own ways, each approach sees the challenge of democratic theory to provide rational responses to the impact of socio- and politico-economic conditions on tradition, family, politics, democracy and the broader scenarios of human development.

At the same time, and largely critical of the models proposed by Habermas, Rawls and Giddens, more radical positions have been put forward, inspired by post-structuralist approaches to the social and human sciences. Here we could mention, amongst others, Laclau and Mouffe's radical democracy, Jacques Derrida's *democratie-à-venir* (democracy 'to-come'), and Slavoj Zizek's Lacanian approach. The significance of such positions is their insistence on accepting the *ethos* of democracy while widening the imaginative horizon of politics and ethics relative to new political and social circumstances, and new accounts of politics and organisation. The basic difference between the two outlined approaches concerns the different ways in which they conceive of democracy. The progress of democracy, *pace* Habermas and Rawls, is envisaged in terms of the universalisation of a liberal democratic model in which consensus and rational agreement are asymptomatic of a well-ordered democratic society (Rawls, 2001).

On the other hand, for Laclau, Mouffe and Derrida *democracy* means precisely the opposite. That is to say, their respective approaches point to the 'impossibility' of establishing a consensus without exclusion together with the fundamental importance of this 'antagonistic dimension' (Mouffe, Ed. 1996) for grasping what is at stake in democratic politics. What is of particular note in these accounts of politics and democracy (and why I think they are particularly important for democratic theory) is that they permit a 'radicalisation' of some of their trends and arguments, thereby granting us the space necessary in which to explore new kinds of social relations and conditions and different kinds of political subjectivity that are emerging in contemporary society.

The above arguments and analyses have undergone varying degrees of re-evaluation in recent years. Comparatively different insights gained from an interrogation of wider fields of enquiry, including the intricate imbrications of politico-economic and socio-cultural analysis, Information science and cultural and new media theories, have suggested that new analyses of democracy need to be developed to take account of the increasingly technological and networked cultures in which we now live (Lash and Urry, 1994; Castells, 1996–8, Brown and Duguid, 2002; Levy, 2000; Hassan, 2004). Central to these emerging theories of the contemporary political situation is the belief that the new challenges that confront us are fundamentally different than those of the past. These are the challenges posed by new kinds of 'globalising processes', in particular those associated with the expansion of the ICTs and transnational computer networks.

Of course, the transit of 'globalising processes' is not an avowedly new phenomenon, intimately connected to the social, economic, and cultural transformations of our 'Global Age' (Albrow, 1997). The 'transnational' experience pre-dates the post-modern world of e-mail, mobile phones and instant wireless digital services (Gilroy, 1993; Hanagan, 1998). Historically, transnational connections, cultures and communities were the "normal" state of affairs. This ubiquitous quality was temporarily concealed during the relatively recent age of the modernising nation-state. Affiliations and supranational organisations based on religion, ethnic Diasporas and trans-regional trading associations were among the many transnational collectivities that preceded the modern nation. Alongside numerous local and sub-national identities, such collectivities were suppressed, submerged and rendered deviant as against the myth of a single, national people asserted by the ascendant modern nation state (Vertovec and Cohen, 1999;

McNeill, 1985). Moreover, it was the rise of the industrialised nation-state that accelerated and massively deepened the processes associated with globalisation, in particular with the spread of mass media forms including national newspapers, cinema, radio and advertising, which brought representations of 'others' into contact with national populations on a previously unimagined scale (Held et al. 1999; Mayall, 1990).

However, the new symbolic and informational codes associated with the advances achieved in, and the dissemination of, ICTs and networked communications have arguably proved to be far less bounded and restrictive than previous 'globalising' tendencies. While the Industrial age offered up huge leaps forward in, for example, the ability to process and distribute physical objects and commodities, the exponential technical advances of the ICT revolution and the proliferation of informational networks are said to carry this process to a new level, the level of digitisation, extending the capacity to process information more efficiently (Castells, 2000; Graham, 2000). One consequence of this is that the key sources of competitive edge are changing, with what has variously been termed a 'knowledge economy' and 'digital capitalism' extending scope to marketing innovation and communications over and above that of product originality and internal production efficiency (Schiller, 1999; Drahos and Braithwaite, 2003). In this new era, information and knowledge is marked out as perhaps *the* crucial area of economic advantage and creation, with intellectual property and copyright becoming key resources around which new controls and 'nodes of "network power"' are created and maintained (Hardt and Negri, 2004: xi).<sup>1</sup>

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri describe how contemporary aspects of globalisation are driven by 'networked' forms of power (2000). What is different about 'network power', they argue, is that it is fundamentally decentred in nature. Whereas the imperialistic endeavours practiced by modern powers were based primarily on the sovereignty of the nation state extended over foreign territory, network power comprises, as its principal elements, the dominant nation states (in particular the U.S and E.U states, as well as, increasingly, China) along with supranational organisations like the WTO and IMF, major corporations and other powers such as intellectual property and copyright patents. What is more, this network power is said to derive much of its vigour from its essentially 'uneven' and 'disproportionate' make-up. Thus, Hardt and Negri argue that while some 'power centres' may hold enormous power and others almost none, there is a need for



various nation-states and corporations to cooperate to create and maintain the contemporary 'global order' which they label 'empire' (2004: xi).

More detailed theories of globalisation have sought to examine some of the ways in which contemporary 'globalising processes' are affecting new kinds of social and cultural relations. Paul du Gay has argued that the condensing of time and space – what David Harvey has called 'time-space compression' (1989) – initiated by new media, communication and information technologies has introduced changes in popular consciousness by stretching social relations and deepening patterns of interconnectedness between distant people, places and increasingly 'multiple' worlds (du Gay, 1997). Today, the ICTs can be said to form both a critical part of the material infrastructure of modern societies and are the principle means by which ideas and images are circulated and identities are shaped. Not only do they sustain the circuits of economic exchange on which the worldwide movement of information, capital, investment, the production of commodities, the trade in raw materials and the marketing of goods and ideas depend, they also truncate the speed at which, for example, images travel, the distances across which commodities can be assembled, the rate at which profits can be realised, even the opening times for numerous stock markets around the world (Hall, 1997: 210). These, according to Stuart Hall, are the new 'nervous system' which thread together societies with very different histories, different ways of life, at different stages of development and dwelling in different time zones. And it is here, he argues

. . . that revolutions in culture at the global level impact on ways of life, on how people live, on how they make sense of life, on their aspirations for the future – on 'culture' in the other, more local, sense (Ibid.).

One consequence of this broadening of social relations across time and space is the susceptibility towards what has been referred to as a kind of cultural homogenisation – the tendency for the world, in effect, to become one place, not simply spatially and temporally, but culturally: the syndrome which some theorists have termed the 'McDonaldization' of the globe (Alfino et al, 1998; Ritzer, 2004). These 'global shifts' are seen as creating serious cultural dislocations by eroding 'local' particularities and differences and producing in their place a predominantly western-centric world view. In fact, evidence of this thesis is not that difficult to find: from the growth of transnational communications corporations such as Disney,

Time Warner, Bertelsmann and News Corporation/Fox, which collectively, and through subsidiary companies, control around 55% of global media sales (*Mediachannel*),<sup>2</sup> to the dominance of Microsoft's Internet Explorer and Internet searches powered by Google, all of which tend to favour the diffusion of a set of standardised cultural products using standardised technologies to every corner of the globe (Google, for instance, provides an interface for 97 different languages).

However, other debates have suggested that the significance of this 'global cultural revolution' are neither as uniform nor as straightforward to determine as the more extreme homogenisers argue. For it is also a characteristic feature that these 'globalising' processes are extremely unevenly distributed around the world – subject to what Doreen Massey has termed the 'power geometry' of globalisation, where some (typically richer) people have greater influence in these processes than others (1994) – and that their consequences are profoundly contradictory and ambiguous. Thus, as John Tomlinson has argued, while there are many negative consequences in terms of the cultural exports of the technologically over-developed 'west' undermining the capacities of older nation states and emerging societies to define the pace and direction of their development, there are also many countervailing tendencies which prevent the world becoming a uniform and homogenous space (1999). This is so, according to Kevin Robbins, because globalisation is very 'ordinary'; its consequences are matters which confront us in our immediate, everyday lives: when we go shopping, eat in a restaurant, watch television, send an email, share files over the Internet, and so forth (1997).

In more general terms, globalisation could therefore be described as a process both of 'deterritorialisation' and 'reterritorialisation'. Globalisation may 'deterritorialise' our immediate experiences, increasingly interweaving them with distant influences, contexts and meanings. At the same time, it can affect new patterns of 'reterritorialisation', with new and other influences and meanings generating new understandings and ways of thinking about the differential development of globalisation itself. This, of course, can have both positive and negative consequences. On the one hand, there has been the new mosaic of groups, campaigns and resistance movements to neoliberal globalisation, with their strong resolve to articulate 'alternative' models of globalisation based on notions of 'direct democracy', 'networks of unity' and 'global civil society' (Mertes, ed. 2003; Hardt, 2002; Hassan, 2004). However, we have also seen many defensive reactions against globalisation which represent powerful tendencies towards 'closure' and

polarisation, such as the growth of the Christian Right in the US, of Islamic fundamentalism in parts of the Middle East, and the petty nationalism and anti-immigrant attitude of sections of European society (Nairn and James, 2005). It is therefore perhaps more accurate to say that the very 'uneven' and disproportionate distribution of globalisation may produce 'simultaneously *new* "global" and *new* "local" identifications than some uniform and homogeneous world culture' (S. Hall, 1992).

All these factors qualify and complicate any simplistic response to globalisation as uniform in its effects. Moreover, the above arguments represent a strong rejoinder to the so-called 'McDonaldization' or 'Americanisation' thesis, pointing to the intricacies and complexities of processes of globalisation across different localities, including the manifold social, cultural, political, economic and technological spheres. And I think these arguments are usefully put in context by John Frow in a discussion regarding the notion of the 'Americanisation' of the Internet – or what has also been reflected on as 'cyberimperialism' (see Ebo, ed. 2000). He writes:

Certainly it's true that the default settings on the net are American: Americans are the dominant user group, they control the protocols and standards, they dominate net-commerce and scholarly resources, search engines are biased to American sites, and this quantitative dominance meshes with the force of other US culture industries. . . Nevertheless, it doesn't seem to me very useful to work with a simple opposition of the global to the local, where the former means the United States and the latter something like resistant cultures; nor does it seem useful to think up ways in which the hegemony of the former can be modified or transformed by the latter (Frow, 2001).

Frow's argument concerning the problematic framing of the global-local opposition is one that Hardt and Negri also accede to (2000). In *Empire*, they argue specifically against what they see as the 'false dichotomy' between the global and the local. Rather than adopting a position which assumes that the 'global' entails homogenisation and uniformity and the 'local' the preserve of heterogeneity and difference, Hardt and Negri call for an approach which addresses the 'regimes of production' that cut across locality and globality. The better framework to designate the distinction between the global and the local, Hardt and Negri argue, is one that invokes 'different networks of flows and obstacles in which the *local moment* gives



priority to the reterritorialising boundaries and the *global moment* privileges the mobility of deterritorialising flows' (2000: 45). The globalisation operated by the capitalist system is not in fact opposed to localisation, they contend, but rather sets in play mobile and modulating circuits of differentiation and identification – that is to say, capital actually thrives on a multitude of differences which it sees as essential to the creation of new 'regimes of production' in its own mould. Thus the challenge, as Hardt and Negri see it, is to explore the potentials for alternative forms of liberation *immanent* to the new regimes of production: to form new subjectivities and communicative commonalities not in *resistance to* globalisation but on the basis of *differences to* globalisation. In other words, to envision and articulate an 'alternative paradigm of global flows and exchanges' (Ibid.: xv; 62).

In line with the aforesaid arguments, I suggest that a more effective way of thinking about these shifting topographies of globalisation is to explore the ways in which its manifold processes may be asserted and felt at different levels of scale. As we have seen, globalisation is not a homogenous system, fully integrated, concomitant and inevitable in its effects. Rather, I suggest that it is a process both of concentration and domination and diversification and complexification; capable of working in international ways as well as in extremely local ways, and which in turn articulates new portraits of power relations between the local and the global. Whether we approve of it or not the new forces, boundaries and relationships initiated by globalisation are transforming both contemporary social practices and the way we see the world and ourselves.

Examining what these changes are and the ways in which they affect us is without doubt important for our understanding of globalisation as an economic and political force, as Hardt and Negri have argued (2000, 2004). But such an investigation cannot be limited simply to those processes' counter-organisation, since this would mean to take other 'globalising processes' for granted. This is the case with Hardt and Negri's account of the ICTs within a logic of 'appropriation' and 'deployment'. By this I mean the way in which Hardt and Negri describe how the 'appliance' of machines and technology be redeployed from the 'production of capital' to the 'construction of a new system of machines' (2000: 405). I argue that this position is premised on the formation of political subjects as 'historical agents' ('the multitude', as Hardt and Negri label it) that are not 'put into question' (Laclau, 2003: 24), but rather are 'put in place' to carry out the stated task, with the question of politics and technology having been settled in advance.<sup>3</sup> In other words, new technologies

facilitate the processes of 'global capitalism', but they also constitute the very tools with which 'we', through the 'singular emergence' of the struggles of 'the multitude' (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 58), can use to define alternatives – a counter-globalisation or 'Empire'. What Hardt and Negri's account fails to examine further is the characteristics of networked technologies like the Internet, and what it may suggest for our understanding of new forms of subjectivity and organisation conditioned and made possible through relationships with, through and between other networks of possibility. What is also required is, therefore, the initiation of new dialogues and ways of thinking about the cultural and technological aspects of globalisation. For it is here, I want to argue, that perhaps the most interesting situations are arising – the situations in which new kinds of cultures of politics are being formed and mediated through the interface with technology itself.

This is particularly true of decentralised or 'networked' technologies like the Internet. In his introduction to *The Internet Galaxy*, Castells describes how the depth, breadth and significance of 'interconnected technologies', from the Internet, email and mobile phones to digital cameras, PDAs and networked PCs, represent the 'digital fabric of our daily lives' (2001). He writes that:

The Internet is the fabric of our lives. If it is the present-day equivalent of electricity in the industrial era, in our age the Internet could be likened to both the electrical grid and the electric engine because of its ability to distribute the power of information throughout the entire realm of human activity (Castells, 2001: 2 – 3).

What Castells encapsulates in this quote is the simultaneously 'everywhere' and 'nowhere' nature of the Internet. On the one hand, the Internet *is* 'everywhere': it is a foundational moment of contemporary globalisation. The Internet has made once private information available to a greater number of people. Actions of private corporations and governments are now more transparent, accessible to larger numbers of people, much of which those in power might not wish to make public (see in particular: <http://www.corporatewatch.org.uk/> and <http://www.labour-watch.com/>). In many authoritarian states where governments control a good deal of information and media, a variety of alternative websites have emerged, as has been happening recently in the Middle East with the Arabic Media Network (<http://www.amin.org/index.html>) and an the Arabic-language News Network Aljazeera (<http://english.aljazeera.net/>). And insofar as the world economy depends

on vast networks, these same networks hold out the potential of offering new forms of communication, resistance and progressive mobilisation, as has been well documented by Hardt and Negri (2000), Naomi Klein (2002) Robert Hassan and others (Mertes, 2003).

However, the Internet is also, in many ways, 'nowhere': it is a 'network of networks', incomplete, imperfect, and without any overall unifying perspective to bond them. But this 'network of networks' also inaugurates another, potentially more radical symposium. Mark Poster draws attention to the way in which networked machines have their effects upon symbols rather than physical matter (2001b). These 'machines', he argues, can be distinguished through their capacity to generate, transmit and store text, image and sound in various symbolic forms (digital files, software protocols, database applications and systems, etc.). The Internet in particular is seen by Poster as undermining the position from which the critique of industrial or modern machines was advanced – that is, the perception of humans as subjects separate from and in opposition to a universe of distinct objects. Rather than working with a simple opposition of the global to the local, or assuming a position that conceives the subject within the modern frames of freedom/determinism, he argues that technological developments like Internet may so alter our routines of communication and so deeply reposition our identities that they constitute a 'second media age' that is distinct from the media of newspapers and television. This relates to the way in which the new modes of sociality and communication initiated by the Internet may suggest new understandings of, and ways of thinking about and interacting with, politics and democracy. This emergent area of discussion is significant, I want to argue, because it grants us the space necessary in which to examine phenomena like the Internet on its own terms, as part of the technological aspects of globalisation, and thus to theorise its consequence for new forms of democratic organisation.

In order to continue to pose the question of new kinds of democratic organisation, however, it is necessary to catechize approaches such as Hardt and Negri's, which are critically discerning of the political and economic aspects of globalisation but fail to develop a more robust appraisal of the technological side of new media in global processes. In resistance to neoliberalism's success in projecting informationised capitalism and the deification of the market as essential components in the extension of 'universal democracy' (i.e. all things to all people), new political actions and movements are using the ICTs to engage various social spheres and modes of



organisation. Following Poster, ICTs like the Internet can be thought of as both a tool *and* as a social space (2001). That is, individuals, organisations and networks operate both through the Internet as an apparatus for communication and within the Internet as an electronically mediated 'social space'. The Internet is often spoken about as a medium for resistance via 'Cyberactivism' (McCaughey and Ayers, 2003). As I see it, cyberactivism comprises two critical elements that mark it out as a new kind of radical politics. 'Cyber' or online activists have not only incorporated recent technology as a 'reflexive instrument' for alternative theories and ideas of process, relation and change (Atton, 2002: 7). But through alternative media sources like indymedia.org, the formation of online community networks such as Fibreculture and Interactivist, and the direct action of "hacktivists" who disrupt commercial computer networks, the ICTs have also contributed to a changing perception of the very meaning of activism, what community means, and how notions of collective identity and democratic change may be conceived. The distinctiveness of this 'animation of politics' is that it is being played and shaped in a number of different ways and at a variety of different levels: from the spread of new forms of political activism, exemplified by the 'tactical networks' of groups like Adbusters, Critical Art Ensemble and the EDT, to the extension of practices more indubitably associated with the expansion of the ICTs, such as peer-to-peer techniques and open source/open publishing networks.

And it is this intercession in the globalisation/technology/politics triumvirate of new kinds of politics that I argue holds out the means to characterise new forms of power, new modes of organisation and communication and new democratising codes that are capable of exposing what Laclau has described as 'new hopes, new demands [and] a more cessible social imaginary' (cited in Zournazi, 2001: 40).

Political struggle today must carve out more space in which to elaborate and define new theories and imaginaries of democratic organisation. Through the extension of new democratic means of struggle, contestation and understanding I argue that the ICTs can play a significant part in this direction. Understanding these new cultures of politics and subjectivity is the first step towards a progressive activism that removes the limits in which new radical democratic theories of politics can both be thought and practiced. And it is with this in mind that I would like the reader to consider what follows.

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<sup>1</sup> As Naomi Klein notes: 'With copyright now the single-largest U.S. export (more than manufactured goods or arms), international trade law must be understood not only as taking down selective barriers to trade, but more accurately as a process that systematically puts up new barriers—around knowledge, technology and newly privatised resources' (Klein, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> See Mediachannel's ownership chart: <http://www.mediachannel.org/ownership/chart.shtml>. See also the collection of essays in Thomas and Nain (2005), which provide detailed contributions about the local and international forces shaping contemporary cultural production.

<sup>3</sup> See Ernesto Laclau's (2003) excellent critique of Hardt and Negri's 'Multitude' as historical agent.

## CHAPTER 1.

### NEW TECHNOLOGIES OF DEMOCRACY: THEORY, PRACTICE AND METHOD.

#### 1.1 CONTEXT.

The low turnouts in the 2001 and 2005 general elections (59% and 61% respectively), the decline in student radicalism, diminishing political party and trade union membership have lead some (Boggs, 2001; Curran, 2002; King, 2002; Crewe, 2002) to assert that there has been a contraction of the political and thus democratic spheres. This thesis will argue that, far from being in decline, democratic cultures of politics may in fact be animated in other ways – albeit ways that are perhaps unrecognisable when viewed merely according to the ‘old/traditional’ nexus.

The emergence of ICTs like computers, information networks and software, mobile phones and Personal Desktop Assistants (PDAs) has given rise to a multitude of new social and communicative activities. Cheap, decentralised and horizontal communication channels and devices have been utilised by a wide spectrum of actors, from ‘anti-globalisation’ activists and users of file sharing networks to open source software licensees and tactical media activists such as RTmark and Adbusters.<sup>1</sup> There have, in addition, been burgeoning discussions of Internet activism and how the ICTs have been used effectively to generate new kinds of political cultures and expressions (Couldry & Curran, 2003; Rodgers, 2003). The early adoption and use of the Internet as an instrument of political struggle by groups such as Mexico’s EZLN Zapatista movement quickly dramatised how a fusion of ICTs and grassroots activism might challenge status quo culture and politics (Best & Kellner, 2001). By making use of the Internet as a technology for organising and communicating local struggles for autonomy the Zapatistas caught the attention of both the academic world and ordinary activists, giving shape to an ‘emergent form of politics more consistent with decentralised networks than with grand narratives and top-down solutions that surfaced in the names of socialism and Marxism’ (Burbach et al, 2001). This analysis is usefully summarised in an excerpt from the Notes from Nowhere editorial collective (2003). They document that:

Activists from around the world declared their solidarity with the Zapatistas autonomous zones, and asked: “What do you want us to do?” The



Zapatistas, taken aback by such attention, replied that for them, solidarity would be for people to make their own revolutions in ways which would be relevant to their own lives. As one activist put it: “the Zapatistas translated struggle into a language that the world can feel, and invited us all to read for ourselves, not as supporters but as participants. (2003: 23 – 4)

In the late 1990s, this new ‘language’ of politics manifest itself quite spectacularly in the so-called ‘Battle for Seattle’ against the World Trade Organisation (WTO) meeting in December 1999, and subsequently moved on to other populist spectacles in Washington, Prague and Genoa (Cockburn et al, 2000). This ‘movement of movements’ – as it has been called by some (Mertes, 2003) – that has surfaced in resistance to such bodies as the WTO and IMF (International Monetary Fund) and their neoliberal policies of market deregulation and privatisation has been described as the first political movement born of the chaotic pathways of the Internet (Klein, 2002). This ‘shared fabric of opposition and struggle’ (Notes from Nowhere, 2003) of so many disparate groups, individuals and actions would arguably have been impossible without the intercommunication made possible by ICTs like the Internet and an ‘evolving sense of the ways in which networks may be *organised* . . . by a nascent citizenry using new media to become informed, to inform others, and to construct new social and political relations’ (Khan & Kellner, 2004: 88).

In the past 10 – 15 years there has been an escalation of new forms of political activism and practice that are quite different from earlier political structures. Responding creatively to the hastening of economic globalisation, the decline of the welfare state, the fragmentation of the socialist tradition, the cultural conditions of postmodernity and the decentring of identity, and the interface with emergent technologies like the Internet and digital communication networks, these nascent political expressions are, without doubt, many and varied. They include, to suggest a few: activist groups such as Adbusters, RTmark and Corporate Watch, publishing forums like Indymedia and Fibreculture, the anti-capitalist, anti-corporate and global justice movements, as well as new types of communication practices, including peer-to-peer file sharing, blogging and ‘hypertextual archives’ or ‘wikis’, and new models of ‘public commons’ or ‘organised networks’ such as the Center for Digital Democracy.<sup>2</sup> These cases can be said to at least point to different ways in which politics is being ‘played’ and shaped today (Hassan, 2004).

Alongside these movements and practices of politics, the wide dissemination of the Internet has given rise to new practices and modes of communication, interaction and consumption. One example specific to the spread of Internet technology is the rise of peer-to-peer (P2P) networking – sometimes called file sharing. Broadly speaking, P2P file sharing refers to the way in which objects such as digital music, video and text files can be uploaded on to a computer harddrive and then exchanged or shared with other users (peers) using a P2P file sharing program. P2P programs like eDonkey, Gnutella and Overnet differ from earlier file sharing services such as Napster in that they enable the sharing of digital files (audio, text, visual) on a decentralised, serverless basis (See Wang, 2004). These new types of P2P networking can, I think, be seen as marking a new articulation of the citizen/consumer categories, redrawing established structures of production, control and distribution by positioning the individual user or subject as a key determinant in the dissemination of new kinds of digital 'commodities' and cultures of consumption (Trend, Ed. 2001; Gere, 2002) that do not comprise physical objects, but rather are 'constructed' through the network of computerised communications.

It was once assumed that the mode of production was a prime determinant in the meaning of an object (Marx and Engels, 1967). More modern methods of analysis place the consumer with a key role in influencing the producer. However, such influence is reliant on the interpretation of the producer. For example, in *Doing Cultural Studies* Stuart Hall et al investigate the ways in which the Sony Walkman™ intertwines the processes of production and consumption (1999). Drawing distinctions between the earlier analyses of Adorno and Horkheimer in *The Culture Industry*, who read the logic of capitalist commodity production as carrying an essentialist meaning, the later work of Pierre Bourdieu (1986) on the differentiated symbolic dimension of consumption, and Iain Chambers' (1990) account of the cultural and political significance of practices of consumption, the authors present a 'cultural study' of how the Sony Walkman is represented, what social identities are associated with it, how it is produced and consumed, and what mechanisms regulate its distribution and use. They refer to these processes as the 'circuit of culture' (1999: 3). Their conclusions draw attention to the ways in which the Sony Walkman has reconfigured the established classification of public and private space – being both public and private at the same time and therefore neither simply public nor private – and how this has led to attempts by some public bodies to regulate usage (120). However, they also refer this back to the 'circuit of culture', noting how the function of the producer – in this case the Sony corporation – attempts to

remedy these 'regulatory antagonisms' by developing new products and peripherals that respond to 'public concerns' (such as smaller earphones that omit less 'intrusive' noise). In this way, their 'circuit of culture' actually serves to underscore the relative 'stability' of the categories of production, consumption and regulation in that, while the authors suggest that meaning may be ascribed at different levels and stages in the production-consumption process, it necessarily revolves around the ways in which those categories are understood and shown to function.

However, I argue that the synergy of technologies that has produced P2P networking (digital music/objects, computer systems and the Internet) potentially transforms these boundaries. Beyond the creation of electrons, P2P is not manufacturing in the traditional sense: no material is produced; no one owns exclusively the means of production. P2P enables digital objects (or files) to be exchanged or shared by and with potentially anyone, and from almost any location, thereby undermining the necessity for close physical proximity between participants (or 'users') and the power structures in place that reinforce those relationships and circuits between producer and consumer, local and global, etc. The model of 'free' content exchange advanced by the P2P phenomenon can in this way be said to redraw established relations of consumption by transforming private assets and material commodities (such as music) into digital objects that can be shared as 'public goods'.

What I think these emerging cultures of politics clearly indicate is a movement away from traditional notions of politics that entail party loyalty, discipline, leadership and structure as precursors for political action. Instead, they more closely resemble what Michael Hardt has suggested is a 'profoundly new mode of organisation': one that is dependent upon an 'amorphous horizontal network form' that privileges the 'formation of "networks of unity" to the building of parties or traditional movements' (2002). As Hardt sees it, the potential of these new kinds of political formations is contingent on whether they choose between modes of organisation based upon 'networks' or 'parties'. Or to be more accurate, between hierarchical modes of organisation based on traditional parties, centralised campaigns and the binary politics of opposition, or on horizontal modes rooted in borderless networks and a potentially limitless diversity. Hardt, as a keen adherent of networks over parties, makes the case for the former:



How do you argue with a network? The movements organised within them do exert their power, but they do not proceed through traditional modes of opposition and organisation. One of the basic characteristics of the network form is that no two nodes face each other on contradiction; rather they are always triangulated by third, and then by a fourth, and then by an infinite number of others in the web . . . [the movements] displace contradictions and operate instead in a kind of alchemy, or rather a sea change, the flow of the movements transforming the traditional fixed positions; networks imposing their own flow . . . (Hardt, 2002: 117).

But if the traditional positions of the past are today rendered at once more uncertain and problematic, no longer so manifestly consistent with a clear left/right binary or accounted for according to the historical opposition of socialism vs. capitalism, how do we account for the emergence of these new kinds of disparate cultures and subjects of politics? And what does a 'politics of unity' mean within a potentially 'limitless' network arrangement?

The above case certainly illustrates the way the speed, dispersed characteristics and connectivity of 'networks upon networks' can be employed to organise a miscellany of political movements. In addition, this suggests that ICTs like the Internet afford the possibility of new forms of political mobilisation, enabling different groups and interests to further their political intentions, forge new connections and instigate new dialogues by means of web pages, listserves, email, chatrooms, weblogs and so forth. This is what I think Hardt means by 'networks of unity': networks as the 'organisational glue' that stretches from the local to the global and is held in tension through the unifying goal of opposing neoliberal globalisation. A kind of 'strength through networks', as Robert Hassan has put it (2004).

If, on the other hand, our purpose is not merely to *act* in different political ways (i.e. networks as opposed to parties; horizontally rather than vertically) but to open up the terrain of politics and democracy themselves, to see those categories in 'new' ways, two perhaps more pressing questions emerge. How might the ICTs and 'networks upon networks' enable us to *see* and *think* politics in other ways? And in what ways might this other politics affect new conceptions of, and ways of thinking about, the politics and democracy?

This study focuses on the role of the ICTs in shaping, and providing a model for understanding, these 'other' forms of cultural representation and consumption and new modes of political practice. In particular I want to outline some of the ways in which the ICTs are bound up with emergent forms of consumer practices and sensibilities that suggest new types of democratic activities. The central contention of the project is twofold. Firstly, it argues that these new forms of politics/practice are not possible without the development of the ICTs, and thus that one cannot be understood without the other. Secondly, it is maintained that this nascent paradigm in turn cannot be adequately understood without new types of theorising.

## 1.2 THEORY.

The two thinkers who have perhaps gone furthest to providing such a new type of theorising, one that is at least potentially capable of accounting for these radical democratic political cultures, are Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985; 1990; 2000; Mouffe, 2000). Working in the post-Marxist tradition, their sine qua non of a Gramscian Marxism and post-structuralist theory has articulated notions of subjectivity and political agency which may yet prove appropriate to the contemporary political situation. It is for this reason that Laclau and Mouffe's work will play an important role in this thesis. However, I want to argue that one important aspect of democratic politics still left under represented and accounted for in their work is precisely that associated with the ICTs. It is this lacuna in their post-Marxist analysis of the contemporary political situation that this thesis will attempt to fill. In order to do so my thesis will critically assess the importance of Laclau and Mouffe's concept of 'radical democracy' in relation to new understandings of democratic political representations and the impact on them of the ICTs.

Laclau and Mouffe's account of radical democracy is premised on the maintenance of the 'liberal democratic form of life' as the modern complex of institutions. The challenge for a 'radical democracy' is to dispense with the idea of democracy as a simple 'form of government' and instead to understand it in terms of the

. . . symbolic ordering of social relations . . . which results from the articulation between two different democratic traditions: on the one side, political liberalism (the rule of law, separation of powers and individual rights) and, on the other side, the democratic tradition of popular sovereignty (Mouffe, 2000: 18).

What is at stake in this account of radical democratic politics therefore relates to the legitimisation of conflict and difference; the 'emergence of individual liberty and the assertion of equal liberty for all' (Ibid.: 19). However, this legitimisation of difference can only be realised, Laclau and Mouffe argue, through an identification with the practices, language games and institutions that comprise the liberal democratic form of life. Thus a radical democratic perspective points up the radical extension of a 'diversity of language games, subject positions and public spaces of antagonism' that are constitutive of the 'interminable struggle(s) and demands for equality and liberty in a wide range of social relations' (Ibid.: 124).

Theoretically, my thesis will question the category of radical democracy in relation to issues of cultural meaning and representation, and their absence in the work of Laclau and Mouffe. Angela McRobbie has raised a similar point with regard to Laclau and Mouffe's post-Marxist position (1992; 1999). In particular she has argued that, while their analysis provides a greater insight into contemporary social mechanisms than Marxism, displacing the unified class subject by an understanding of 'identities' as contingent and inherently plural, it is not able to account for the 'actual processes of acquiring identity and meaning'. This is because, according to McRobbie, their 'very commitment to the historically specific allows them to not be specific at all'. Consequently, '[they] cannot spell out the practices of, or the mechanics of, identity formation, for the very reason that they are, like their subjects, produced within particular social and historical conditions' (McRobbie, 1992: 725). In other words, McRobbie's problem with Laclau and Mouffe's discourse is its level of 'abstraction'. Her solution to this dilemma is to produce 'concrete' and 'specific' analyses which will be 'concurrent' with Laclau and Mouffe's claims. She clarifies this contention by calling for more detailed ethnographic studies of 'everyday life', such as that pursued in her later work on the British fashion industry (1998) and on the new sexualities in womens' magazines (1999).

However, my contention is that one thing Laclau and Mouffe's discourse cannot actually 'offer' is, precisely, the 'actual processes of identity formation' that McRobbie seems to want from them – for to do so would mean to replace one set of limits (the unified class subject) by another (the 'concrete' and 'actual' subject position). For McRobbie, the one thing that would remain 'unquestioned' is identity itself, as identity is, for her, *simply* a product of the 'fleeting, fluid and volatile



formations of everyday life' (Ibid.: 730). But Laclau and Mouffe's argument is actually more rigorous than McRobbie understands. Their claim is not that the empirical (or 'pragmatic construction', as Laclau refers to it) plays no role in the formation of identities, but rather that all identities are necessarily *differential* identities – i.e. that they are never fully closed or formed, having always to go 'beyond themselves'. For Laclau and Mouffe, this account of the differentiability of subject positions (identities) constitutes the theoretical terrain on the basis of which the notion of radical and plural democracy finds the first conditions under which it can be envisioned. For it is only if we accept that identity formation cannot be led back to a concrete and positive founding principle that pluralism can be considered radical (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 167).

This priority extended to the 'logic of contingency' has provoked some critics of Laclau and Mouffe's position to regard it as implying that 'almost anything is possible' (Osborne, 1991). And from an almost diametrically opposite perspective, Žižek has argued that they reduce questions of subjectivity and political agency to mere Foucauldian 'subject positions' within discursive structures, in which case the subject is just 'spoken for' by some antecedent discursive structure (cited Butler et al, 2000). In response to these two critical positions David Howarth has argued that Laclau and Mouffe's account of political agency and subjectivity has striven to find a middle path between them. Employing the Derridian notion of 'undecidability' – understood in a political context as the impossibility of establishing a consensus without exclusion and the irreducibility of that alterity as the very terrain in which a democratic politics can be thought (cited Mouffe, 1996) – Howarth shows how Laclau and Mouffe's thesis engages the 'tension' between these critical poles. On the one hand, he argues, Laclau and Mouffe propose an anti-essentialist approach to subjectivity, rejecting the idea that political agents are simply the product of preconstituted identities and relations (i.e. base/superstructure). Instead, their position acknowledges that while human beings are constituted as subjects within discursive structures, these structures are inherently contingent and adaptable. Thus, once the 'undecidability' becomes visible in dislocatory situations when structures no longer function to confer identity *absolutely*, subjects become political agents in the more radical sense of the term, as they identify with new discursive situations and act to reshape structures (Howarth, 2004: 264).<sup>3</sup>

However, Howarth also remarks that Laclau and Mouffe's discourse does incorporate a certain set of normative assumptions about politicality itself – a set of

political and ethical positions which serve to ground the very idea of democratic political action. This can be seen, he suggests, in their own proposal for a plural and radical democracy, which comprises both the extension of demands for liberty and equality into evermore spheres of social life, as well as seeking to incorporate a sense of its own contingency and undecidability: 'This moment of tension, or openness which gives the social its essentially incomplete and precarious nature, is what every project for radical democracy should set out to institutionalise' (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 190). The critical dilemma (in both senses of the term) for Laclau and Mouffe is, in Howarth's view, how to tackle and resolve this tension between the articulation and defence of radical democracy, on the one hand, while at the same time keeping that category open to new systems of difference. In respect of the former, Howarth argues that the affirmation of radical democracy necessarily requires that 'democratic practices' are immanent to the very project itself if it is to avoid the risk of internal incoherence. While on the latter point he remarks that the argument for radical democracy has to

restrict and limit the general operation of hegemonic practice to only those practices that are commensurate with the fostering of autonomy and difference . . . It goes without saying that further elaboration of this particular project of radical democracy, in conjunction with its justification vis-à-vis other radical critiques of radical democracy, such as the deliberative models of democracy articulated by Jurgen Habermas, or William Connolly's project of 'agonistic democracy', is still required (Howarth, 2004: 271).

Howarth's point here is that radical democratic theories of politics necessitate the circulation of 'other' conceptions of democracy in order to justify the very project of radical democracy itself. I argue that this distinction is crucial for two reasons. Firstly, the critique of radical democracy from other accounts of democracy (such as, though not exclusively, the examples suggested by Howarth above) forces us to rethink the possibilities and conditions of radical democracy as a theoretical concept. And secondly, this rethinking of radical democracy enables us both to investigate and to explore new and other conceptions of democratic politics.

However, unlike Howarth, I would not propose any apparent 'resolution' to the tension between the 'hegemonic' aspirations of radical democracy and that category's necessary openness to a diversity of communities, identities and subjects (and thus interpretations). Indeed, I would suggest that it is precisely

radical democracy's openness to multiple interpretations that serves as its most progressive dimension. Some readings of Laclau and Mouffe's discourse do, nevertheless, come close to proposing a 'way out' of this double bind. For example, Simon Critchley offers the following claim that Laclau's theory of hegemony requires an ethical dimension of infinite responsibility to the 'other' (2004). This is necessary, he argues, to avoid collapsing the radical affects of hegemony into an arbitrary 'voluntarism', where the meanings accorded to particular social relations depend upon the value-neutral whims of the subject (ibid.: 116). The notion of infinite responsibility refers to the Derridian notion of the political decision in an undecidable terrain. By pointing to the inerradicability of antagonism and argumentation, notions like undecidability and decision are not only fundamental for politics, as Laclau and Mouffe both argue, they also suggest the infinitude of the terrain in which political decisions can be thought, formulated, taken, contested and remade. Thus, as Derrida stresses, without taking a rigorous account of undecidability, it is impossible to think the concepts of political decision and infinite responsibility: undecidability continues to inhabit the decision and the latter does not close itself off from the former (Derrida, 1996: 86 – 7). So Critchley's claim, *pace* Derrida, is that one path *through* the aforesaid tension in Laclau and Mouffe's work is to 'learn' something from deconstruction. He writes:

What [Laclau's] theory of hegemony lacks, and can indeed learn from deconstruction, is the kind of messianic ethical injunction to infinite responsibility described in Jacques Derrida's work from the 1990s (Critchley, 2004: 116 – 7).

While I do not disagree all told with Critchley's claim, I would however raise an important caveat. The point I want to make is that it is not really a question of 'learning' something from Derridian deconstruction, but rather about the ways in which we *think* the relation between the ethico-political responsibility of deconstruction and the radical investments made (the decision itself, the 'moment' of the subject) because of this responsibility to the other. In this way, it is the tension itself, and the infinitude of the means by which this tension can be 'considered' and 'acted-on', that is constitutive of the terrain of the political *and* the democratic. As Laclau has himself noted in response to Critchley's claim:

It is only if a set of empty terms – 'justice', 'truth', 'people', etc – become the names of ethical responsibility, only if they are not necessarily attached to



any content but are always given reversible contents through collectively elaborated radical investments, that something like a democratic society becomes possible. This means an endless movement between the ethical and the normative dimensions (Laclau, 2004: 291).

On the one hand, this notion of an 'endless movement' does have irreducible overtones of 'smoothness' and 'homogeneity', leading one to make the paradoxical accusation that 'everything and nothing is possible', and thus giving force to Critchley's above claim regarding the collapsing of social relations into the value-free partialities of the subject. But it is also characteristic of a certain – and necessary – dynamic of openness. This is an openness that is not *simply* open but, as Paul Bowman and Jeremy Gilbert have both suggested, one that is intrinsically *problematic* and hence *generative* in any number of ways (2003). That is to say, an openness which both says what it is possible up to a point to have in common, and which takes dissociations, singularities, diffractions, and the fact that numerous people and groups can, in various places and situations, have recourse to that openness, into account. And it is this dynamic of openness, in particular, which can be seen as the condition for the radically 'unknowable' – and thus immanently 'thinkable' – possibilities of the future.

This account of openness as problematic and thus productive is central to the rethinking of any understanding of radical democracy, I want to argue. This is because it allows us to begin exploring and investigating how the category of radical democracy can itself be thought about in 'other' ways. A crucial distinction that I make is, however, that the above commentaries on radical democracy are still too narrow, confined as they are around existing notions and accounts of democracy as the principal means through which to understand and to situate 'politics'. Therefore, by questioning Laclau and Mouffe's grounding of radical democracy as a 'multiplication of public spaces of antagonism', and the centrality to this articulation of such key protagonists as the 'new social movements', I intend to show how rethinking these ideas in relation to the emergence of new kinds of politics and 'other' conditions of organisation will facilitate an elaboration of new theories of radical democracy. Crucially, I will 'push' the understanding of radical democracy further, inquiring how and in what ways this category is appropriate to discussions regarding the Internet and the nascent forms of cultural and political representation associated with its expansion. In particular, I argue that Laclau and Mouffe's account of radical democracy is overly centred around existing practices

and theories of democracy, and that this restricts them from extending their analysis in order to take account of the new kinds of social relations, modes of communication and practices of politics as they are organised within increasingly 'networked' societies (Hassan, 2004; Rossiter, 2004). Thus, for example, whereas Laclau and Mouffe's understanding of politics calls attention to the idea of movement-based forms of organisation together with demands for social rights, I argue that the ICTs suggest a 'crisis of organisation' (Lovink, 2002), the very essence of which is to be both 'dispersed and partially convergent' (Frow, 2001). Unlike the 'party' or the collective movement, new forms of organisation may be highly decentralised, not focused in any initial sense or institutionalised. Small and informal, disorganised or sporadic in nature, new types of practices of consumption (P2P), organised networks (open publishing networks, listserves) and political cultures (tactical media networks) may develop that mirror the 'networked' character of the Internet, coming apart and regrouping, and combining and reshaping in ways that undermine contexts of clear or systemic subjectivity and understandings of social change.

Taking, as the basis for this rethinking of radical democracy, Laclau's insistence that 'the only democratic society is one which permanently shows the contingency of its own foundations' (Laclau in Butler et al, 2000: 86), I consider the critical potential of radical democratic theory in relation to new understandings of political representation and subjectivity as they are affected in the increasingly 'networked' milieu of the early twenty-first century.

### 1.3 PRACTICE.

A central argument of this research is that an understanding of the emerging dynamics between media, ICTs, networks, cultural production and political activism is a step towards *rethinking* the arrangement of the political and the democratic in an increasingly networked society. As Khan and Kellner have argued, following the work of technology theorist Howard Rheingold (2003), advances in new media technology, including the Internet, wireless networks, and personal mobile informational technology, are shaping rapidly the 'nonlinear structural elements' for the emergence of 'multiple networks of citizens' that interweave local lifestyle choices, global political demands, and everything in between (Khan and Kellner, 2004: 89). Therefore, by illustrating how the specific situations of ICTs like the Internet enable new modes of communication, interaction and activism that may

radically alter previous practices and relations and our understanding of them, I suggest that it is possible not only to question existing theoretical approaches to politics and democracy but also to open up those ideas to other ways of thinking and new moments of analysis.

Practically, I will critically analyse the political cultures and representations of recent forms of political activism and their utilisation in disorganised and non-hierarchical modes of networked communication (mobile phones, text messaging, e-mail, listserves, newsgroups, weblogging, etc.). To do this I engage key concepts and debates in cultural theory and politics, using recent examples from tactical media activism, cultures of peer-to-peer 'sharing' on the Internet, open source networking and dynamics of open publishing to bear out my claim for the emergence of 'another' kind of politics: one that opens out the possibility of new ways of thinking about democracy, the political and politics more appropriate to the conditions of globalisation, informationisation and neoliberal capitalism, and to our understanding of social change. A number of questions are considered in line with this contention, such as: How does the idea of the Internet as a 'network of networks' sit with traditional conceptions of a public sphere of 'rational exchanges of communicative debate'? Does the decentralised and variable nature of exchanges on the Internet problematise established relationships between politics and consumption, and between public space and private accumulation? And in what ways can we think the category of radical democracy as a 'multiplication of public spaces' in relation to new processes and networks of politics, exchange and communication? Perhaps more importantly, are new theories of radical democracy better suited to answer, and stand up to, new conditions of globalisation, consumption and neoliberalism, or are the older (liberal) theories of democracy adequate for this purpose?

In chapters three through six I will develop a response to these questions. My intention is to demonstrate the relationship between the abovementioned new cultures of politics and their potential for generating new theories of radical democracy. Chapters four, five and six will be organised according to explorations of particular domains of the ICTs. What I want to do here is, in effect, to look at technologies like the Internet in relation to the extension of new kinds of radical democratic cultures of politics. By doing this, I am referring to the emergence of new forms of cultural politics as signifying a movement towards reconfiguring traditional conceptions of democratic politics and agency. The practices of politics that I include within this methodology share certain key theoretical assumptions



(such as the dynamic of openness, the inescapability of contingency, unevenness and antagonism, and the interminable interrogation and hence ongoing articulation of the democratic) which I argue justifies their grouping as a basis for understanding how their unique development with the spread of the ICTs holds out the potential for democratising society.

In my chapter three I provide an analysis of the ways in which our understanding of politics and democracy can be questioned in relation to 'other' kinds of politics, in particular those conditioned by the ICTs and the dynamics of network culture. Firstly, my third chapter tests the claims for the 'democratic potential' of the new technologies. Here I argue that by illustrating how we understand the unique combination of new political cultures and the uneven situations of decentralised technologies like the Internet it is possible not only to question theories of democracy but also to lay open those theories to new pathways and new moments of analysis. Secondly, through a range of examples, including peer-to-peer file sharing, the actions of the anti-globalisation movement and the development of 'hypertextual archives' like 'wikis', I show how the specific contexts of technologies like the Internet enable new modes of communication, organisation and activism that may radically alter our understanding of the ways in which politics is affected. This chapter concludes by drawing attention to the crucial role of the political practices and cultures of representation associated with the spread of the ICTs in shaping a radical democratic response to the challenges of neoliberal globalisation and democratic struggle. Here I therefore present a framework through which I engage my subsequent three chapters, about Tactical Media networks, Peer-to-Peer, and Open Publishing, and how these distinct practices can be seen in the context of their radical democratic potential.

The framework I advance in my third chapter, built on an appraisal of post-Marxist theories of politics in this and my second chapter, enables us to take account of the emergence of new cultures, practices and modes of consumption as new 'moments' of politics. This framework accordingly facilitates the questioning of the political and the democratic relative to new conceptions of those categories. For example, I argue that, while it may be inappropriate to position the ICTs in terms of a struggle for futural democracy (Hardt & Negri, 2000), this does not mean that we cannot explore them in relation to new forms of subjectivity and democratic politics. Underscoring this is my contention that technologies like the Internet do not necessarily 'harness' or 'promote' democratic values as a specific function, or in

terms of artefacts and their 'effects' (Smith and Marx, 1994). Thus, whereas Hardt and Negri talk about the ICTs as holding out the 'promise of a new democracy' (2000: 300), I question what technologies like the Internet actually have to do with democracy? In line with Mark Poster's thesis, I argue that the Internet does not discriminate between values and processes or promote certain practices over others (2001b); and it is not an officially organised and structured public sphere of communicative exchange wherein any struggle is construed around how best to 'get your message out there' – a fourth, or even fifth estate. However, I further suggest that this claim should not be taken to mean that the Internet does not make possible new kinds of practices and new cultures of communication, exchange and action which may necessitate a questioning of our understanding of established relations and modes of organisation.

Chapter four will examine the nature and potential of tactical media networks. Here I will follow Geert Lovink's description of tactical media as a media of 'crisis, criticism and opposition'. Informing this account is Lovink's claim that tactical media concerns, above all, the 'generation of new spaces of antagonism' both through existing and new modes of communication (from radio and video to digital media and computers) which together 'challenge and disrupt the "normal" or anticipated flow of meaning and representation' (2002). One practice of tactical media, Culture Jamming, is described by the Notes from Nowhere ensemble as the 'subversion of media and cultural artefacts' (2003), including advertising billboards, cultural icons and logos, and hacking websites, with the intention of trying to mimic the media it is attempting to distort' (such as Adbusters' anti-consumerist 'buy nothing day' or their 'anti-brand' Blackspot trainers). Proponents of Culture jamming, such as the Adbusters network (<http://adbusters.org/home/>), can be said to build on this tactical methodology by pursuing an analysis of the object, medium or technology itself as a site of nascent antagonisms. The aim of such an approach is, according to Kalle Lasn, founder and editor of the Adbusters magazine, to further destabilise existing power structures by undermining the way information flows, the way institutions wield power, the way TV stations are run, the way the food, fashion, automobile, sports, music and culture industries set their agendas. Above all, it means to radically alter the way we interact with media, technology and culture and the ways in which meaning is produced in the twenty-first century (Lasn, 1999, 2000).

Some examples of tactical media that I will focus on include the political activist techniques of Adbusters and Critical Art Ensemble (CAE) and the actions of

Electronic Civil Disobedience (ECD) as practiced by the Electronic Disturbance Theatre (EDT). These forms of activism consider the 'tactical/strategic' nexus of working with the ICTs and media in general together with their organisation within a particular framework or political strategy. They are therefore useful as illustrations of how a tactical media can be understood to 'work'. Through these specific examples I will demonstrate how the tactical media paradigm, in its continual questioning of the changing relations between the old and the new, alternative and mainstream, and subversion and social practice, may hold out the potential for developing new kinds of 'radical political cultures' that are better equipped to stand up to the new conditions of an increasingly networked society.

However, using the ideas of post-Marxism put forward in the work of Laclau and Mouffe et al, I will also argue that the radical democratic potential of tactical media can only really be considered through a more rigorous questioning of the relationship between *tacticality* and *infinite responsibility*. Through their post-Marxist theories of politics I will show how such tactical gestures as 'subversion' and 'direct action', as well as the tendency towards a politics of 'spectacle' and the 'carnavalesque' (Boje, 2001), also require a degree of *responsibility* as a basis for any radical democratic vision, particularly if they are to have a purchase beyond the often enclave environment or safe-haven of the activist ghetto. In line with Robert Hassan, I therefore suggest the requirement for tactical media actions to 'at least begin to think "the next step forward"' (2004).

If, as tactical media proponents like Lovink, Garcia and Schneider argue, tacticality is about 'reclaiming imagination and fantasy' (1997; 2002), then, while concurring with this sentiment, I suggest that this possibility is only discernible if we engage it with the ideas advanced in respect of radical democracy. I think that one way of affirming the ethico-political (or *infinite*) responsibilities of democracy, on the one hand, together with a consideration of the nature of the political on the other, is through the politically enabling category of radical democracy. One way I approach this is to explore the possibilities of tactical media networks as opening up new 'spaces' of connection, articulation and organisation which both illustrate the potential for new 'temporary alliances' (between activists, hackers, journalists, critics/academics, etc.) – or 'democratic imaginaries' or 'plateaus' – while at the same time retaining a mobility that mirrors the more unorganised and spontaneous characteristics associated with the spread of the ICTs and networks. In this chapter I will therefore show how the nexus of responsibility and democracy is essential if



we are to sustain and develop the ideas of tacticality as progressive and repoliticising cultures of radical democratic politics.

Chapter five will discuss the emergence of peer-to-peer (P2P) file sharing over the Internet. I argue that the Internet enables new kinds of relations and practises of transaction that may elicit the potential for other forms of 'autonomous' economies and 'democratic' exchanges, those not delineated along capitalistic lines. The ways in which objects like digital music, video or text files, for instance, can be uploaded on to a computer hardrive and then exchanged or shared using a peer-to-peer program such as Overnet or e-Donkey without the normative presumptions of commodity exchange (that is, through the measure of capital, the creation of scarcity, and the marketing of desire). Some have used the term 'gift economy' (Barbrook, 1999) and also 'sharing economy' (Poster, 2001b) to talk about digital transactions on the Internet. I actually use the term 'mixed economy', since this calls attention both to the methods of participants or 'peers' working together *outside* the immediate mediation of traditional markets and bureaucracies, as well as to the extension of existing economic models into the Internet domain (for instance, I talk about the expansion of commercial music downloading sites such as Apples' iTunes and the new Napster service). I suggest that the combination of peer-to-peer techniques and Internet technology can be seen as contributing to a new cultural practice of 'resignification', wherein cultural objects can be reorganised and redisseminated in new ways, in principle undermining the relations through which such objects may otherwise have been understood to function (i.e. from producer to consumer, addressor to addressee, and so forth). This, I further argue, sets the practice of P2P out as marking a new articulation of the citizen/consumer categories, redrawing established relationships by positioning the individual or subject as a key determinant in the dissemination of new kinds of digital commodities.

The notion of everyone being able to be a potential server and a client through P2P sharing undermines the traditional institutional commodity delivery model of producer-consumer. On a P2P program such as eDonkey each subject is positioned not only as a consumer of a digital object like a music file but enters into a transformative relationship both as a user (peer) and a distributor and, what's more, a producer as well, reconfiguring the diffuseness of relations between subject and object. This, I will further argue, opens out a new critical paradigm concerning the kinds of relationships transpiring within, across and between the spatio-

temporal dimensions of the Internet, the power configurations these may affect, and the possibilities this may afford for extending P2P techniques in new and different domains, all of which will be given due consideration.

In order for P2P sharing to open out new possibilities beyond simply those of music file sharing, I suggest a more radical interpretation of P2P is required. I propose a way of thinking about P2P that enables us to focus on and make visible its 'multiplicity of infrastructures' and 'applications'. One application of P2P that I consider is that of the way in which the principle of 'sharing' can be extended into new and different domains. In particular, I focus on the different dynamics of 'sharing' that are being mobilised in the field of academia. I look at the role of electronic archives (or 'e-archives' for short) in facilitating new patterns of acquisition, communication, exchange and organisation through which to increase both readership and exposure of material and scholarly work. Similar to more conventional modes of P2P sharing, I suggest that the e-archive extends the possibility of establishing new spaces of organisation and exchange which raise new questions for institutional authority by redrawing our relationship to the politics of knowledge acquisition and dissemination, including how it is practised and understood.

To conclude, I show how the mobilisation of 'sharing' techniques in different areas constitutes the 'chance' of P2P. Rather than defining P2P as one thing (anti-consumerist, piracy, software communism, and so on), I see the 'chance' of P2P in terms of its capacity to initiate a new articulation production/consumption and exchange that interrupts established frameworks that endeavour to legitimise and define the 'organisation of things' as *they are*. Further, I suggest that we can link this to the democratic possibilities this may harness.

Chapter six builds upon some of the ground covered in my fourth chapter, about the organisation of networked forms of politics. In this chapter I intend to draw on the technical foundations of networks – including their nonlinearity, unevenness and incommensurability – to investigate aspects of open publishing on the Internet. One of the key features of open publishing is what Graham Meikle has described as 'active participation' (2002). This refers to the way in which content can be generated by anyone who contributes to an open publishing forum or network. I will focus on three different examples of open publishing networks the Fibreculture listserve, the Interactivist network, and the Indymedia network. All of these

networks can be said to build on the active participation model by allowing individuals to generate very specific kinds of content; copy that is reliant on the interaction of contributors rather than the selections of traditional 'gatekeepers' or the criteria of conventional 'news values'.

One example of this is provided by the non-commercial Indymedia activist network (<http://www.indymedia.org.uk/>). The content of the Indymedia UK website is created through a system of open publishing: anyone can upload a written, audio or video report/article directly to the site through an openly accessible web interface. For example, through its 'video projects application' the Indymedia platform has utilised digital video streaming technology to relay footage and reports of previous May Day demonstrations (2000 – 03), as well as the 2003 anti-Iraq war protests in London. Through this system of 'Direct Media' individual activists on the ground could record selected events in real time and relay them back to the website, in that way contributing to a type of 'semi-autonomous news network'. This network can be said to build on Meikle's aforesaid 'activist model', in that it relies to a large extent on the participation of individual users to generate content, define selection protocols and manage editorial decisions – the network merely organises this commons.

I argue that this model clearly opens up a dialogue concerning the reconfiguration of traditional conceptions of the public sphere. Rather than the Habermasian notion of a rational exchange and deliberation between communicating subjects (1989, 1996), or even the realm of newspapers and television discourse, with their representations of 'the other' (Dahlgren and Sparks, 1993), open publishing enables individuals to generate, communicate and share information and knowledge through new relations of networked exchange. The examples I put forward in this chapter can therefore be said to convey new configurations of a public sphere of democratic exchange – the nascent forms of what Ned Rossiter has referred to as 'organised networks' (2004). I argue that these emergent networks suggest the potential of open publishing to 'organise' elements of the Internet's distinctive *decentralised* and *uneven* structure (much in the same way that peer-to-peer organises the exchange of digital files over the net) by generating, acquiring and shaping knowledge and information as a 'social process' (Arnison, 2001), rather than through the vertical hierarchies of traditional media models. Moreover, the key distinction that I make is that open publishing networks actually undermine the notion of rational debate and deliberation by calling attention to the



'problems' of consensus and stability through the extension of decentralised dialogue and communication infrastructures, which challenge the very idea of synthesis or any necessary 'coming together' (McCaughey and Ayers, Eds. 2003). In exploring this area, my intention is to determine how and in what ways these networks of open publishing require new understandings of radical democracy and organisation to account for new relations of communication and exchange.

#### 1.4 METHOD.

The view of radical democratic politics developed in this thesis is based on interdisciplinary foundations. One is post-structuralist theory, as it has developed since around the mid-to-late 1960s. In particular the theoretical interlocutions of Laclau and Mouffe in their pivotal work *HSS* (1985), which drew on influences from poststructuralist theory, Derridian deconstruction and Foucauldian discourse analysis in order to articulate and document a post-Marxist theory of democratic political struggle (Sim, 1998). Another is the expansive body of literature – both empirical and theoretical – concerning an elaboration of the ways in which a post-Marxian/post-structuralist perspective has informed new ways of thinking and acting 'politically' in relation to contemporary challenges. The Interdisciplinary method of cultural studies is one example of this development. The tradition of cultural studies associated with the Birmingham school brought together methods and issues from economics, politics, media and communication studies, sociology, literature, education, technology studies, anthropology, and history, with a particular focus on gender, race, class, and sexuality in everyday life. Moreover, its encounters with, among others, postmodernism, post-structuralism, the politics of identity and the new social movements, broadened the scope of political enquiry by giving attention to subjects such subcultures, popular media, music, and technology (Grossberg, 1992; Morley and Chen, 1996). By looking at how 'culture' is used and transformed by 'ordinary' and 'marginal' social groups, cultural studies sees them not simply as consumers, but also potential producers of new values and cultural languages (S. Hall et al, 1999). Also of significance is the way in which some of the new (post-Birmingham) directions and territories that are currently being mapped out across, and at the intersections of, cultural studies and cultural theory (such as ethics, new media, cyber-culture, globalisation theory, anti-capitalism) are giving rise to new areas of political enquiry and theorisation. Through the influence of philosophers such as Derrida, Deleuze and Lyotard, as well as the political theory of writers like Hardt and Negri, this 'movement' of theory is reflected in the investigation of new

spaces of culture and politics. These comprise, though are not limited to, some of the cases discussed in this thesis, including: the 'network cultures' of cyberactivism (Hacktivism), technopolitics and alternative social movement networks (Terranova, 2004; Khan and Kellner, 2004, 2005), the 'alternative globalisation movement' and the strategic paradigms of the 'global multitude' and 'global civil society' models (Kingsnorth, 2003; Hardt and Negri, 2000, 2004; Passavant and Dean, 2003), and the configuration of new political bonds that are a direct consequence of networked media, such as the 'transnational' figure of the netizen and the assemblage of networked 'humachines' (Poster, 2001, 2005) and the framework of new institutional forms or 'organised networks' like the Sarai media centre and Fibreculture (Lovink, 2002; Rossiter, 2004).

In order to investigate these nascent forms of political activism as new registers of democratic politics the proposed interdisciplinary methodology exploits advantages of empirical, textual and theoretical approaches. The methodology consists of the empirical/textual analysis of a range of political practices and forms of Internet activism, the cross-theoretical analysis of these emergent culture of politics, including approaches from a post-structuralist-inspired cultural studies, post-Marxist political theory and new media/network theory, all of which offer insight into the flow and flux of contemporary political subjectivities. The primary endeavour of this prospectus is to consider the way in which new political processes, conditioned and made possible by ICTs like the Internet, are recasting traditional theories of radical democratic politics.

The outlined methodology opens up an original way of engaging the theory of radical democracy in relation to the nascent practices and theories of politics and activism enabled by the ICTs. This takes place on two fronts. Not only does it enable me to provide an account of the nature and character of new modes of political organisation as they are occurring in our increasingly networked society, but it also allows me to convey that the way we understand the outlined practices of politics has a crucial bearing on how we can begin to think about them as new horizons of democratic possibility. This in turn can play a significant part in bringing about new political questions as a basis for rethinking radical democratic politics in the contemporary era. In addition, the ancillary fact that I consider the category of radical democracy as essentially *undecidable* and in no way 'fixed' or 'permanent' extends scope for, on the one hand, a reflection on the nature of the political and the democratic, and on the other hand, a 'hyperpoliticisation' (Derrida in Mouffe,

1996). This actively extends scope for an exploration of the political dimensions of the ICTs and network cultures, allowing us to open out and explain new theoretical possibilities for new forms of communication and organisation and what these might mean for our understanding of politics and democracy. By questioning the traditional paths and codes of politics and democracy themselves and the theories that make those categories *meaningful*, I argue that the proposed interdisciplinary methodology is necessary if we are to keep the question of politics itself 'open' – which is, of course, in the best tradition of radical democratic theory.

Why is an interdisciplinary approach important to the thesis I present? I believe that a principle stimulus for the development of scholarly thought is the introgression of concepts, knowledge and methods of one field into another. I propose an interdisciplinary methodology because conventional disciplines and fields of knowledge do not address phenomena of ICTs and politics in a way that brings together critical theory, new media theory, post-structuralist and discourse analysis and cultural studies. In addition, more systematic methodologies, particularly in the areas of new media/Internet theory and democratic theory, are, by themselves, too hide-bound if one wants to pursue an investigation of the diverse milieu of politics, ICTs and networks. For instance, although the theory of Lovink (2002) and Meikle (2002) considers the myriad ways in which new kinds of politics are being thought and acted out in networks, they fail to expand on this approach to examine how and in what ways these nascent political expressions are redrawing theories of democracy. Similarly, while I advocate Laclau and Mouffe's post-Marxist account of an agonistic model of radical democracy as providing a framework that initiates a reflection on the nature and character of contemporary democratic struggles, I argue that their approach is too intently grounded in the liberal model of democracy. One consequence of this containment of radical democracy within a liberal democratic framework is to limit the scope of the former's radical theoretical potential. This leads to a subsequent charge that Laclau and Mouffe's account of politics and democracy may be inappropriate to theories of the networks society – an accusation that has been made by, among others, Rossiter (2004) in his thesis on 'organised networks' (which I will discuss in my third chapter). Arguing against this charge, however, I suggest that an interdisciplinary method is necessary to assist in the opening out of new theoretical possibilities, reinvigorating a discipline (such as democratic theory) with new knowledge that may require new ways of thinking about and understanding the service of that discipline. If we want to engage in the complexities of contemporary politics as they are occurring in



network societies, and to understand their significance for radical democracy and its theoretical evolution, what is required is to integrate the insights of different disciplines. This will allow us to develop a more intellectually robust framework for thinking about the possibilities of politics and democracy relative to new conditions.

Interdisciplinarity is not, then, a rejection of the disciplines. It is not to suggest that, for example, new media theory cannot make available different ways of thinking about democracy. Indeed such notions as 'e-democracy', 'Internet commons' (Rheingold, 2003; Lessig, 2004) and 'cyber democracy' (Poster, 2001b; Khan and Kellner, 2004) can be seen as attempts to recast conceptions of democracy for the Internet age. An interdisciplinary approach is rooted in disciplines but offers a corrective to the conviction of disciplinary ways of knowing, thinking and understanding. While we require the depth and focus of disciplinary ways of knowing (for instance, Lovink, Poster and Rossiter all make provision in their work for Laclau and Mouffe's post-structuralist influence, particularly in the areas of social conflictuality and the inerradicability of antagonism) we also need interdisciplinarity to broaden the context and establish links to other ways of constructing knowledge. This is, I would suggest, the fundamental epistemological justification for an interdisciplinary methodology, whether it is confined to exploring the intersection between two related fields of learning, such as politics and the media, or aspires to new understandings of knowledge across those fields, for example in the way 'media' hybridised literary, sociological and political methodologies in the area of cultural studies (Storey, 1997). An interdisciplinary approach can serve as a useful rejoinder to theoretical complacency or quietism in any area. By refusing to become a rigid program or the application of a knowledge, the flexibility and diversity of an interdisciplinary approach are its epistemic hallmarks. This constitutes both the stimulus of an interdisciplinary method as well as one of its perceived short-comings. That is to say, the very fact that an interdisciplinary approach is not a specific discipline provides scope both for a questioning of different fields of enquiry and that of its own claims, keeping those means open as new areas of enquiry and possibility. A cross-disciplinary dialogue therefore allows me to understand and communicate the import of new practises of politics for generating new forms of knowledge, ideas and concepts that may extend how we can negotiate with, and respond creatively to, theoretical frameworks in particular ways (Rodgers et al, 2003).

The thesis I present will put forward a new political framework through which we can a) *think* the ideas of radical democracy in relation to new conceptions of the political and the democratic; b) why this is necessary for contemporary political thought; c) how we can approach this *rethinking* relative to demonstrably new kinds of political practices; and d) what this suggests as regards both the nature and potential of a 'radical democratic imaginary'. In concluding this thesis, I will demonstrate how the proposed framework contributes to new ways of thinking about radical democracy.

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<sup>1</sup> Some references include – the GNU open source software license: <http://www.gnu.org/copyleft/gpl.html>. RTmark is an online portal for activist funding and assistance, and they can be found at: <http://www.rtmark.com/>. And Adbusters, as the name suggests, is a media foundation committed to supporting and promoting an anti-consumerist bent. Their site is: <http://www.adbusters.org/>.

<sup>2</sup> In order of appearance – Corporate Watch: <http://www.corporatewatch.org.uk/>. Indymedia: <http://ukindymedia.org/>. Fibreculture: <http://www.fibreculture.org/>. For some real depth to the recent debates surrounding P2P file sharing see: <http://www.slyck.com>. To find out more about open-editing archives or 'wikis', two good examples include: <http://www.wikipedia.org/> a collaborative encyclopaedia project; and <http://www.dkosopedia.com> a collaborative political encyclopaedia. The notion of 'organised networks' is discussed in Rossiter (2004) and the Center for Digital Democracy can be found at: <http://www.democraticmedia.org/>.

<sup>3</sup> This is also what Jacques Derrida has referred to as 'hyperpoliticisation' (see Derrida in Mouffe, 1996: 77 – 88). See also chapters two and four of this thesis.



## CHAPTER 2.

### RADICAL DEMOCRATIC POLITICS: A CRITICAL APPROACH.

#### 2.1 INTRODUCTION.

In this opening part of my thesis I engage some of Laclau and Mouffe's key works on post-Marxist theory, most notably their elaborations on the category of radical democracy. Following on from the issues introduced on page 20 I want to return to their theory of radical democracy in order to show how it provides a means to account for and to understand emergent modes of political subjectivity and agency. I consider some of the secondary literature surrounding the category of radical democracy, including the work of Butler (2000), Gilbert (2001, 2003), Norval (2003) and Hillis Miller, (2003), in order to develop a critical appraisal of Laclau and Mouffe's formation of a post-Marxist theory of political struggle. Taking, as the basis for this analysis, Laclau and Mouffe's account of radical democracy as the 'multiplication of new antagonisms and new [political] subjects of change' (1985; Laclau, 1990; Mouffe, 2004), I argue that if we are to investigate the potential for the emergence of new modes of democratic politics then a more thorough interrogation of the category of radical democracy is essential. While I share Laclau and Mouffe's conviction that a 'radical' democracy constitutes the best means by which to 'foster the continual proliferation of new voices, new communities, and new identities, as part of an ongoing process of democratization' (1985: 165), if we are to account for the new modes of ICT-centred politics that are occurring today I argue that we must be prepared to rethink our own understandings of politics and democracy, as these categories become increasingly more complex and uncertain.

Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe are at the centre of many debates about the rearticulation of present-day political thought and this is not surprising since the implication of their work is radically to open up and deepen democratic effects into more and more areas of social life (Critchley & Marchart, 2004). But while Laclau and Mouffe's account of a 'radical democratic politics' brings together 'current left political thinking and theoretical developments around the critique of essentialism' (namely Marxism) as a basis for understanding the 'widening social struggles characteristic of the present stage of democratic politics' (Laclau, 1990: 51), key gaps in their post-Marxist appraisal of the contemporary political situation leave important areas of radical democratic political enquiry unexplored. One important

aspect of democratic politics left unaccounted for in their work is precisely that associated with the expansion of technologies like the Internet and the nascent political cultures of an increasingly 'networked' and 'information-rich' society. This is significant because, since the publication of Laclau and Mouffe's key work, *HSS*, we have witnessed a mushrooming of technological expansion, including the wide diffusion of personal computers, as well as the development of digital technology, mobile phones, email and the Internet, to name a few. Although their subsequent work offers passing comments about the relationship between an 'information revolution', 'globalisation', 'new technologies' and the emerging theories of an 'anti-globalisation' movement (Mouffe, 2000, 2005; Laclau, 2004), they provide little, if any, critical engagement with how these developments might reconfigure not just the terrain of politics and democracy, but how our understanding of those categories may undergo transformation as well.

In order to explore these lacunae in Laclau and Mouffe's analysis of present-day democratic politics, I critically engage their category of radical democracy in relation to new understandings of democratic politics and the impact on them of the ICTs. By questioning their discernment of radical democracy as a 'multiplication of public spaces' (1985), and the centrality to this polemic of such key protagonists as the 'new social movements', a rethinking of that category will enable us to elaborate new radical democratic theories of politics that may be more appropriate to discussions regarding the Internet and the emerging forms of cultural and political representation associated with its expansion.

The model of radical democracy elaborated by Laclau and Mouffe is therefore identified as being too confined within existing frameworks of politics and democracy – even if it is critical of them and aims not to be. This can be practicably demonstrated in their reconsideration of liberal democracy, and their subsequent formulation of a 'radicalisation' of modern liberal democratic principles. Central to this formulation is the nature of the political community and the shaping of political identity (citizenship). While defending liberal pluralism (including the notion of individual rights and the principles of justice and equality) both the liberal and the socialistic/communitarian conceptions of the political community are criticised: the liberal account for being too instrumental and predicated on the consensualisation of political positions, and the communitarian approach for being pre-modern and potentially totalitarian. Thus, the interpretation that Laclau and Mouffe advance is one that radicalises the grounding tenets of liberal democracy – liberty and equality

for all – and uses these as a point of departure for articulating an ‘agonistic’ and ultimately irresolvable radical democratic politics that takes into consideration such politics as equality of rights (social, gender, sexuality) and self-determination for cultural minorities.

Whilst not rejecting Laclau and Mouffe’s position, or suggesting that the articulation of a heterogeny of social demands is not important in the extension of radical democratic forms of politics, other modes of politics may also require elaboration in respect of a ‘radical democratic potential’ – in particular those modes of politics that are organised in networks. Thus, rather than confining my analysis to those ‘democratic individuals [that] can only be made possible by multiplying . . . the forms of life that foster identification with liberal democratic values’ (Mouffe, 2000: 96), my concern is to investigate the potential for the development of *other* political forms and their role in the promotion of new contexts of democratic organisation. This will lead me to consider a number of different ways of thinking about radical democracy. This difference lies in the affirmation of practices and values that are internal to the formation of new relations and technics of politics and organisation in networks. Through an investigation of the political dimension of ICTs and networks we can begin to think what new kinds of communication and organisation might mean for our understanding of politics and radical democracy.

## **2.2 HEGEMONY AND SOCIALIST STRATEGY: A CRITICAL APPRAISAL.**

The pivotal work in which Laclau and Mouffe’s theoretical précis is advanced, *HSS*, can be seen as perhaps the first systematic attempt at articulating and documenting a post-Marxist theory of democratic political struggle (Sim, 1998). It is generally agreed that this jointly authored book has helped to establish post-Marxism as a definite theoretical position in its own right (Easthope, 1999). This position has been explored and expanded further through dialogues with other important movements in contemporary theory, notably including poststructuralist theory and deconstruction. This collative methodology – necessary, Laclau and Mouffe contend, for ‘understanding the wider social struggles characteristic of the present stage of democratic politics’ – has been cultivated in the *Phronesis* series of books published by Verso and edited by Laclau and Mouffe, including, respectively, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (1990), *Emancipation(s)* (1996) and, most recently with Judith Butler and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* (2000). Indeed, the primary aim of the *Phronesis* series is identified as



'the establishment of a dialogue between key theoretical developments and left-wing politics'.

In *HSS* Laclau and Mouffe develop a thesis which assigns importance to the rise of the 'new social movements' (such as feminism, and the ecology and peace movements) and to the development of new forms of cultural critique (most notably poststructuralist theory), reading them as an opportunity to 'revitalise' Marxism. Through a genealogical deconstruction of Marxist theory, and the subsequent redeployment of the Gramscian notion of Hegemony, the authors attempt to develop a *pluralist* post-Marxism capable of entering into a 'discursive relationship' with new theoretical developments. Conceptually, Laclau and Mouffe envisage their analysis as both challenging the essentialist claims of orthodox Marxism – in particular, its postulation of society as an 'intelligible structure that could be intellectually mastered on the basis of a universal class position' (1985: 2) – while at the same time striving to retain some of its revolutionary spirit (Sim, 1998).

At the time of its publication, however, *HSS* provoked a wealth of controversy within both the academic and political left. One of the most outspoken and vitriolic criticisms of their 'destruction' (as it was referred to) of Marxism came from Norman Geras in the pages of *New Left Review*. In the opening paragraph to his critique, Geras outlined his position in straightforward terms: 'It [*HSS*] is the product of the very advanced stage of an intellectual malady . . . it is theoretically profligate, dissolute [and] without regard for normal considerations of logic, of evidence or of due proportion'. Furthermore, as Geras widened his critique to the very justification of Laclau and Mouffe's 'anti-essentialist' theoretical stand, he claimed that: 'if there are good reasons for not being, or for ceasing to be, a Marxist, then so-called post-Marxism isn't one of them'.<sup>1</sup> Geras's hostile denunciation of post-Marxism prompted a response from the authors themselves in a following issue of the same journal (subsequently reprinted in Laclau's 1990 publication). In a deliberately provocative essay, entitled 'Post-Marxism Without Apologies', Laclau and Mouffe announce their expectation of just such an attack from what they regard as 'the fading epigones of Marxist orthodoxy'. Declaring their bewilderment, though, as to why an author such as Geras should open an intellectual discussion by using such an 'avalanche of ad *hominem* arguments', they nonetheless afford his critique of their theoretical position due consideration. To cite one example, on the matter of 'determination' and 'relative autonomy' in Marxist discourse, Laclau and Mouffe

reject Geras's claim that by dispensing with determination in the last instance they are effectively abandoning determination per se. On the contrary, they argue

. . . it is not that [we argue] the autonomy of the state is absolute, or that the economy does not have limiting effects vis-à-vis the state's action, rather, what we are saying is that the concepts of 'determination in the last instance' and 'relative autonomy' are *logically* incompatible (Laclau and Mouffe in Laclau, 1990: 115).

Because Laclau and Mouffe look on these two opposing forces as essentially discordant, they argue that there will always exist the prerequisite of an 'antagonism' between them. And it is to the extent that such antagonism exists, and that we avoid also the theoretical assumption of a rigid either/or opposition, that the [Marxist] hypothesis of the final closure ('suture') of the social is accordingly renounced. It is necessary instead, Laclau and Mouffe contend, to commence from a plurality of political and social spaces which do not refer to any ultimate unitarian foundation – at least, that is the philosophical premiss of a radical democracy. Therefore, their marking out of a project of radical democracy insists that, above all, the articulation between socialism and democracy is a political project: 'it is the result of a long and complex hegemonic construction, which is permanently under threat and thus needs to be radically and continuously redefined' (Ibid.: 124). This being the case, any project of radical democracy can only really be located in an 'anti-essentialist' or post-Marxist terrain

From the standpoint of the intellectual tradition of the American left, Stanley Aronowitz's critique (1986/7) of Laclau and Mouffe is altogether more constructive than the abject hostility exhibited by Geras. While broadly sympathetic with the thrust of their deconstruction of orthodox Marxism, Aronowitz nevertheless raises fundamental questions concerning its practicality in terms of political action. He argues specifically that, while Laclau and Mouffe seek to extend to the whole of civil society the concept of democratic revolution as an alternative to state socialism, their understanding of democratic pluralism as the autonomisation of disparate discourses and struggles and their equivalence, in its desire to show the incipient authoritarianism in Marxism, has 'relegated out of existence notions of moral, discursive or any other kind of authority'. It is this confusion in Laclau and Mouffe's thought, Aronowitz continues, which prevents us from 'engaging in such issues as what might happen when a social movement gains power, not only within a civil

society or state, but also how its moral authority may enable it to set the agenda for left politics'.<sup>2</sup> It is Aronowitz's contention that, while Laclau and Mouffe succeed in raising the right kinds of issues for Marxism's regeneration, their 'radical democratic politics' lacks the pragmatic coherence to form the basis for left-wing political action. In his view, their political thesis should, therefore, be considered a series of *hypotheses* rather than a definite theory.

I will deal more specifically with these criticisms during the course of this chapter, but for now I want to continue this questioning of post-Marxism a little further. In what follows I question the intellectual convictions of *HSS*. Through the key categories of hegemony and radical democracy, I open out a more thorough interrogation of the theoretical foundations for Laclau and Mouffe's development of a post-Marxist theory of politics.

### 2.3 RADICAL DEMOCRATIC THEORIES OF POLITICS.

Laclau and Mouffe's post-Marxist account of politics can be said to be informed by a commitment to a specific kind of project – a radical democratic one. The prospectus of this project is twofold: to pursue a negotiation between the universality of the Marxist tradition and the specificity of contemporary social struggles, and considering this as a starting point for the outline of a new politics of the left based upon the project of radical democracy (Laclau, 1990). Through a 'deconstructive genealogy of Marxism', Laclau and Mouffe therefore situate their project in a simultaneously post-*Marxist* and *post-Marxist* terrain. This paradoxical situation of both belonging and not belonging to Marxism is succinctly articulated in 'Post-Marxism without Apologies'. They write:

We believe that, by clearly locating ourselves in a *post-Marxist* terrain, we not only help to clarify the meaning of contemporary social struggles but also to give *Marxism* its theoretical dignity, which can only proceed from a recognition of its limitations and of its historicity. Only through such recognition will Marx's work remain present in our tradition and our political culture (reprinted in Laclau, 1990: 130).

It is through this deconstructive approach to Marxism that Laclau and Mouffe advance their central post-Marxist claim. They argue that the *very form* of political possibility, of freedom and of emancipation(s) lies not with an objective mastery of



the social but, on the contrary, with the requirement for a certain dislocation of the social structure. For it is only through the recognition of the *impossibility* of the social, Laclau and Mouffe insist, that it then becomes possible to develop alternative accounts and understandings of society itself and the political possibilities emerging from it (Ibid.: 41 – 4). And it is here, in the 'temporal boundaries' of a post-Marxist terrain, that they locate their delineation of a project of radical democracy.

Laclau and Mouffe's account of post-Marxism therefore implies a *partially positive* relationship with Marxism. It retains, for instance, the insight of historical materialism (history as the product of struggles between different social agents: the contingently worked through product of politics) while at the same time rejecting Marxism's metaphysical ontology – its theory of history as the dialectical unfurling of forces *outside* the scope of cognitive human intervention (i.e. base-superstructure). So post-Marxism, at least in the way that Laclau and Mouffe conceive it, is the consequence of a deconstructive displacement of some of Marxism's key principles. This results in an ontological prioritisation of politics as the process by which different social identities and interests are not just contested but continually created (Gilbert, 2001). This newly characterised terrain of 'radical democratic politics' can thus be seen as a viable political option arising out of what Jacques Derrida has suggested is the 'renouncement of a desire to rule, control and master' (1999).

The principle theme of a radical democratic theory of politics relates, on the one hand, to a form of politics that is universalistic or hegemonic in its aspirations and, on the other hand, one that is fully compatible with the specific and differential projects of radical democracy. This ostensibly contradictory nexus of the universal and the particular is crucial to how we begin to *think about* the political itself and the ethico-political orientation of radical democratic activity. Drawing on deconstructive insights (notably a reading of the Derridian notion of 'undecidability', which I will return to subsequently), Laclau and Mouffe argue that making visible the contingency of social relations through a questioning of the relation between universalism and particularism necessarily leads to a rethinking of both of those poles. Instead of viewing universalism and particularism as opposed and mutually exclusive logics (which is the point upon which they part company with Marxism's claims to the universalisation of a 'particular version of the good', i.e. the strategic role of the class struggle in the course of historical development) they endeavour to

lay bare the imbrication and fundamental interconnectedness of these two categories. Specifically, Laclau and Mouffe show why it is not a matter of choosing *either* the universal or the particular, but of articulating – in a decidedly ‘political’ way – the relation between the two. This intercession between the universal and the particular is crucial to any account of radical democratic politics, since it pushes to the fore the indeterminate or ‘undecidable’ relation between those two categories as the *very terrain* in which new kinds of democratic politics can be both thought and formulated. Thus, as Linda Zerilli has accurately observed, ‘although the language of universalism as spoken by Laclau and Mouffe searches for some common ground between the particular and the universal’, it is more so by way of articulating their ‘mutual contamination as *the condition of politics*, that is, how each is rendered impure by the irreducible presence of the other’ (Zerilli, 2004: 89).

In the preceding account the universal is therefore accorded an ‘empty’ status, such that no particular demand can exclusively fulfil – or to use Laclau and Mouffe’s term ‘suture’ – the link between universal task and concrete historical force. However, as Zerilli goes on to question, if the space of the universal is always that of an empty motif, is there not a risk of positing the universal itself as an ‘inflated particular’? That is to say, the universal, because it is a category without a completely fixed content, may actually risk universalising particularity by conjecturing the appropriateness of *any* particular demand over and above that of a universal one (Ibid.: 95).

Laclau’s response to this claim is included in an essay entitled ‘Glimpsing the Future’ (Laclau, 2004). In this essay, he calls attention to a number of earlier arguments, made initially in *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* and developed subsequently in *Emancipation(s)*, that the universal and the particular are inextricably intertwined: ‘there is no relation of succession between the universal and the particular . . . universality . . . can only exist within particularity, which thus becomes groundless yet unconditional’ (Ibid.: 311). Laclau argues that an understanding of the relation between the universal and the particular requires a specific kind of political thinking or, in Laclau’s lexis, a ‘hegemonic operation’. Hegemony means that the relation between the universal and the particular comprises not the ‘realisation of the essence of human kind’ – a ‘reconciled society’ – but an ‘ever-incomplete conflict-ridden process of negotiation whereby a multiplicity of struggles and demands articulate different social objectives and political strategies’ (Laclau, 1990: 78). Politics, especially democratic politics, can

never overcome conflict and antagonism; its aim, rather, is to establish unity in a context of difference and diversity. For Laclau, such 'unifying gestures' are to be found through an extension of the principles of liberty, equality and justice to evermore spheres of social demands or 'rights'. However, the very fact that this unity must be articulated through the interplay of a network of differential social demands – rather than contextualised in the form of a rule or plan to be followed – means that every consensus or 'unifying gesture' exists as a temporary result of a provisional hegemony, and that it always entails some degree of exclusion. Thus, Laclau goes on to suggest that if democracy is possible, it is precisely *because* the universal has no necessary body and no definitive content: 'different groups, instead, compete between themselves to temporarily give their particularisms a function of universal representation' (Laclau, 1996: 34).

Here we can see the presence of the double-bind that suffuses radical democratic theory: the universal is incompatible with the particular, but cannot, however, exist without the latter. Such is the paradox of democracy that the 'non-solution' to this incompatibility is, in fact, the very condition of democratic and political possibility. Gilbert, for instance, has suggested that it is the middle point of any such politics which lays bare a kind of 'productive tension' that is 'useful for providing both the logic of the political and a theory of political action' (Gilbert, 2003). From this perspective, the politicality of a particular formation (Laclau and Mouffe would likely use the example of a particular social demand such as the gay rights or environmental movements, and I will return to this later) must be understood in terms of its capacity to engage this productive tension as the *condition* of its forward movement. That is to say, a politics which is universal in its aspirations and assumptions, but only so from a perspective informed by anti-essentialism and the philosophy of difference (e.g. radical democracy). Accordingly, it is the continuity of the negotiations (or 'language games') between these two irreconcilable yet indissociable demands that underlines a radical political enquiry committed equally to the 'question' ('decision') of politics and to a 'rethinking' of the terms of the political and the democratic. What is more, it suggests an opening to the possibility of other ways of *acting politically* – a necessary component, I argue, in extending our understanding of, and ways of thinking about, the category of radical democracy. For Gilbert, what is at stake in such a politics is nothing less than politicality itself, and the differential meanings and assumptions this may comprise: '[this involves] identifying the most politically desirable projects with those which



combine a certain radical newness, a position on the “leading edge” of historical change’ (Gilbert, 2003: 153 – 5).

## 2.4 ASCERTAINING ‘THE NEW’ IN RADICAL DEMOCRATIC POLITICS.

The notion of ‘the new’ is clearly of significance to any conception of a radical democratic politics, as Laclau reminds us: ‘the possibility of a democratic transformation of society depends on a proliferation of new subjects of change’, as well as a ‘multiplication of dislocations that enable a plurality of new antagonisms’ (Laclau, 1990: 41). But while Laclau and Mouffe may well eschew the possibility of establishing explicit criteria through which to identify the emergence of new antagonisms, the fact that they offer this comment at all – and all of their statements regarding the ‘possibilities’ opened up by the proliferation of new antagonisms or ‘surfaces of emergence’ (1985; 1990) – suggests that at some time it will be necessary to refer to a new antagonism *as such*, as a new instance of democratic possibility. So here we encounter a fundamental dilemma for Laclau and Mouffe’s account of radical democratic politics: how to retain the proposal of a radical democracy as a multiplication of ‘new subjects of change’ while in no sense attempting to determine that category or the spaces of antagonism and organisation (‘possibilities’) emerging from it.

Aletta Norval has identified this dilemma as a crucial deficit in Laclau and Mouffe’s conception of democracy (Norval, 2004). In particular she argues that, while their account of radical democracy presupposes the dissolution of the Marxian ‘markers of certainty’ (the resolve of the economic base on social relations, the historicity of the class struggle and the traversal of capitalism) as opening up a privileged place for the role of dissent, disagreement, difference and antagonism in the formation of new political identities, they nevertheless fail to develop their insights into the actual institutionalisation and formation of new democratic processes any further.

Consequently, Norval suggests that Laclau and Mouffe’s emphasis on ‘hegemonic’ outcomes and ‘contingent’ conditions runs the risk of overstating disagreement and antagonism to the extent that the nature and aims of democratic decision-making becomes subsidiary. Outlining both the deficit in Laclau and Mouffe’s theory of radical democracy and a proposed ‘common ground’ on which to address this perceived shortfall, Norval suggests the following:

Whilst giving some attention to the specificity of democratic subjectivity, [Laclau and Mouffe's] account of politics stands in need of deepening its theorisation of the nature of decisions and argumentation in a democratic context. The emphasis on hegemony and contingency, nevertheless, is a crucial starting point for the further reflection that is necessary in this respect. It is here that [their] conception of democracy may benefit from drawing upon a weakened model of deliberative democracy (Ibid.: 158 – 9).

This call for a 'weakened model' of deliberation together with an antagonistic outline of democratic politics is one that requires further elaboration, since it opens out an important debate concerning the nature of democratic argumentation and the decision-making process.

Norval's central claim is that the Habermasian-inspired model of deliberative democracy can impart to radical democratic theory a deeper understanding of the actual practices of the institution and maintenance of democratic forms. Jurgen Habermas has long been concerned to elaborate a normative political theory of the 'public sphere' (Calhoun, 1992). Since the 1980s Habermas has endeavoured to develop an ethics of 'discursive will formation' that he argues can underpin rational-critical dialogue between communicating individuals. Discourse ethics are rules of engagement that, according to Habermas, assist the production of an uncoerced 'rational consensus' on moral norms of 'generalisable interests'. He identifies these generalisable interests according to three specific criteria. The first is characterised by *pragmatic* discourses, whereby 'experts' construct possible programs and their consequences and offer choices between alternatives – such as occurs in an elected parliament. The second concerns *ethico-political* discourses that go beyond contested interests (such as political representatives) to affect and develop through deeper consonances of 'common forms of life'. Habermas uses the diverse examples of ecological questions, traffic control and immigration policy to suggest ways in which discourses about different polities may be shaped according to more immediate or everyday interests. And the final criterion incorporates *moral* discourses and values which are submitted to a 'universalisation test' within a constitutional framework of rights. A good example of this is the recent debate in the UK concerning the extent to which democratic civil liberties and human rights can be curtailed in name of 'national security' and the perceived threat of a terrorist attack. For Habermas, the process of democratic deliberation may include and mix together any of these uses of reason and decision-making (Habermas, 1996: 162 –

5). Deliberation is thus open, in principle at least, to a diversity of practices of public debate which includes argumentation, bargaining and compromise, and political communication for the purpose of the free articulation of opinions and perspectives. Agreement is rational when it has conformed to the principles that Habermas contends are 'inescapable presuppositions' in all communication and which, when made explicit, enable a norm or 'generalisable interest' to be discursively validated (Ibid.).

Norval's position attempts to explore and expand on the ways in which the relation between hegemonic universality and democracy can be understood in terms of a theory of 'generalisable interests' which entail democratic agreement as a central feature. That is to say, while Laclau and Mouffe's account of radical democracy brings to the fore relations of power, hegemony, argumentation, and an emphasis on disagreement rather than consensus as fundamental to an understanding of democratic processes, Norval sees the imbrication of a weakened model of Habermasian deliberative democracy as introducing a conception of how and in what ways democratic processes can be formulated as institutional features. Thus, while she acknowledges that the deliberative model cannot account for a wide variety of features of actual democratic decision-making, which is precisely what Laclau and Mouffe's antagonistic model of radical democracy extends scope for, what it does provide is, according to Norval, a 'way to address the permeability of the boundaries between such deliberation and the force of rhetoric and persuasion in argumentation' (Norval, 2004: 159).

In a direct rejoinder to Norval's charge of 'overemphasising' disagreement and antagonism in his construal of radical democracy, Laclau questions the extent to which her position implicitly accepts the terrain in which the model of deliberative democracy is posed. For Laclau, the deliberative terrain is governed by two overriding assumptions: 1) the generally equal conditions of the participant in the process of decision-making; and 2) the extent to which institutional arrangements or procedures ensure that such equality is guaranteed. The problem with these postulated set of rules is, however, that they are premised on a high degree of social consensus and the general equality of the participants in a homogeneous public sphere. Thus, while the first assumption may *as a minimum* allow for the articulation and circulation of a range of practices and identities, the second assumption actually reduces the process of deliberation and decision-making to a set of procedural rules – a universality that can be directly expressed once it has



been attained through dialogical convergence (a 'rational consensus'). As such, it is unable to take into consideration how different identities and practices are actually constituted in situations of inequality and social fragmentation, and how

. . . representation and articulation takes place only because there is an essential unevenness between social agents, who belong always to particular groups within society, and the community conceived as a whole. The latter only exists as far as a political group assumes, for a time, the representation of that communitarian universality. That is what Hegemony is about (Laclau, 2004: 297).

Contrary to Norval's claim that he actually neglects the question of democratic institutional arrangements, Laclau's position can perhaps be said to provide a more rigorous theorisation of the nature of democracy and the decision-making process in an uneven and heterogeneous terrain. The risk with Norval's emphasis on the deliberative model, however weakened, is that of leaving aside entirely the question of a wider communitarian or 'public' deliberation. Thus, Laclau's point is that it is precisely *because* articulation and deliberation are, of necessity, indeterminate and contingent that they cannot be determined by, or reduced to, a set of deliberative rules *outside* any consideration of specificities. And this is why, for him, 'radical' democracy will always differ from democracy *as it is said*. Laclau writes:

Democracy is only radical if it incorporates into democratic deliberation actors who have been, so far, excluded from the process of decision-making . . . and as the constituencies of a potential democratic deliberation are constantly transformed and expanded, the institutional framework which makes that deliberation possible will also be variable. *Radical* democracy cannot therefore be attached to any a priori fixed institutional formula (Ibid.: 295).

Here we can therefore see how, in Laclau's conception of democracy, the simple institutionalisation of contingency and uncertainty is not enough, in and of itself, for democracy to be radical. What is also required is to bring to the 'arena of deliberation' new social actors who have been precluded from it. However, this is not possible, he argues, without some kind of 'permanent revolution' in the democratic institutional arrangements – the 'contingency of their foundations' (Ibid.).

Norval's point regarding the decision-making process is, nevertheless, a valid one. But while I agree, in part, with the grounds on which she situates her criticism of Laclau's theorisation of democracy (namely, the requirement of the political decision as a horizon of the democratic imaginary), I disagree with her inference regarding the deliberative model of democracy – which seems to me to be more about 'resolving' a deficit on the disagreement/agreement side rather than exploring the radical possibilities of this causal 'lack' of the deliberating/decision-making process. I think there is in fact a more radical way of thinking about this tension between the uncertain and contingent character of radical democracy, on the one hand, and the requirement for new democratic decisions on the other. My criticism of Laclau's position is not that he gives insufficient weight to the disagreement/agreement nexus. Rather, I argue that because his account of radical democracy is based on a traditional complex of institutions, identities and procedures *as they are* (in particular the liberal democratic state – however reconfigured – and the composite of identities that transpire both as a consequence of that structure and because of its fundamental 'incompleteness') he is unable to extend his analysis to look at new kinds of relations that are occurring in other situations – such as the new modes of sociality, labour, communication and politics as they are organised within increasingly networked societies.

My own way of responding to the above criticism is to reconsider the category of 'indetermination' as it appears in Laclau's work. A more thorough perusal of this category will enable us to do two things. Firstly, it will allow us to take account of the political decision in a context of difference and diversity; or the idea of radical democracy as a necessarily 'impermanent moment or occasion in which goals may be achieved' (Butler, 2000). And secondly, it opens out the possibility both of understanding and of identifying 'other' kinds of politics as 'new moments' of radical democratic organisation. This proposal can be neatly summarised in a quote by Simon Critchley and Oliver Marchart, who write that

. . . a radical democratic project would be one in which the ineliminable tension between universalism and particularism is consciously retained, the contingent nature of the political *decision* is fully accepted, and the dimension of universality remains as an empty horizon not to be turned into another positive ground (Critchley and Marchart, 2004: 7).

But more than this, I argue that the interminable interrogation of this 'ineliminable tension' is essential in order that we do not exhaust the practice or potential of radical democracy.

## 2.5 QUESTIONING 'THE NEW' IN RADICAL DEMOCRATIC POLITICS.

For Laclau and Mouffe, as we have seen, indetermination is in fact the *very condition* of any radical democratic political decision; uncertainty should not make us feel politically paralysed, but rather should be seen as at once opening up the field of political possibilities while at the same time removing the grounds for complacency or restriction in any area. In this account of radical democratic politics there can be no sense of political possibility if we assume that a give political situation is already absolutely determinate and determined. Accordingly, Laclau and Mouffe argue that a certain *indeterminacy* is essential before we can feel that any kind of political action (decision) is necessary.

For example, Laclau's thesis concerning the *infinitude of the social* can be explained according to this logic of indeterminacy. By this he is referring to the impossibility of society to constitute itself as a unitary and intelligible object owing to an 'excess of meaning that it is unable to fully master' (Laclau, 1990: 81). Society, according to this explanation, is always ultimately unrepresentable: any representation – and thus any political space – is an attempt to constitute society, not to determine what it is. For Laclau, then, the social must be identified with this infinite play of differences and representations. 'It is, therefore, mere event, mere temporality' (Ibid.: 82). In that way, the social is punctuated *through and through* by indetermination; that is, by the infinitude of relations between the construction of social space and the failure of those relations to fully constitute or universalise themselves.

Jeremy Gilbert has suggested that this position is very close to Jacques Derrida's account of *undecidability* (Gilbert, 2001). More notably Derrida's comment that: 'a decision can only come into being in a space that exceeds the calculable program of determinate causes. There can be no . . . responsibility without this passage by way of the undecidable' (cited in Patrick, 1997: 75). However, I believe there are a number of problems with the category of indetermination which may differentiate it from Gilbert's equation with undecidability. This concerns, in particular, the



relations and differences of force which permeate that indeterminacy, thereby allowing determinations in particular situations to be stabilised through decisions. So, one way that undecidability is a more appropriate term than indeterminacy concerns the way in which the former category brings those relations and differences of force (as the terrain of politics) in to play. In this way, the potential for making new political decisions is redoubled, since it is the very disclosure of undecidability that unlocks the sphere of decision and decidability and makes political action possible. Derrida makes this point:

I say “undecidability” rather than “indeterminacy” because I am interested more in relations of force, in differences of force, in everything that allows, precisely, determinations in given situations to be stabilised by means of a decision . . . There would be no indecision or *double-bind* were not between determined (semantic, ethical political) poles, which are on occasion terribly necessary and always irreplaceably singular (Ibid).

One reason that ‘undecidability’ is preferable to ‘indeterminacy’ is that the former term underlines the requirement for politics and for the continuance of the political decision. The element of the undecidable ensures the structural impossibility of securing an objective knowledge of a particular decision, judgement or action; it frustrates the very path of such demands. However, while undecidability cannot be rendered accountable to an objective or universal decision, this in no way precludes one from taking into account the moment of decision – and the identification of that moment as an ‘instance of politics’. In fact, I would say that it is the very ‘direction’ of Derrida’s writing that it does endeavour to take critically the affect of undecidability and what it implies for the political decision, including his caution as regards that which would reduce action to the mere application of a knowledge, or ethics and politics to a technique.

The theme of undecidability can, I suggest, be approached in relation to a deeper understanding of politics and the political decision. Indeed the above extract from Derrida clearly indicates the necessity of taking a thorough account of undecidability in order to *think* the concepts of political decision and ethical responsibility. Crucial to his dialogue is the following two-fold claim: that undecidability is not a moment to be overcome and that conflicts of duty (responsibility) are interminable. In an earlier interlocution with Laclau and Mouffe Derrida engages this notion of infinite responsibility specifically in relation to the

dual themes of undecidability and decision. He writes that: 'if one does not take a rigorous account of undecidability it will not only be the case that one cannot act, decide or assume responsibility, but one will not even be able to *think* the concept of decision and responsibility' (Derrida in Mouffe, 1996: 86). The notion of undecidability is here understood as an irreducible dimension of both the decision and of responsibility. That is to say, one cannot give up the infinitude of responsibility because there would, paradoxically, be no responsibility: if responsibility were not infinite you could not have moral or political decisions and actions. Thus, to paraphrase Derrida, whatever choice or decision one makes, one cannot say with good conscience that they have made a good choice or that they have assumed their responsibilities (Ibid.). One might say that, above all, the decision presupposes undecidability, and that this is our responsibility.

To put the above triumvirate of undecidability, decision and responsibility in more straightforward terms, this means that a decision can only be considered on the basis of a certain undecidability and the fact that there is 'something' to decide between, that there is 'difference'. A decision *without* that experience of undecidability would in fact equate to the application of a rule, a law or a tradition to be followed – something that radical democratic politics eschews. It is in that way I argue that the exposure of undecidability can be said to be that of the order of the *hyperpolitical* (Mouffe, 1996). By this I mean that politicisation – together with ways of 'thinking about' politics and of 'acting' politically – never ceases because undecidability continues to inhabit the decision. For that reason, every decision proceeds simply as a 'moment' or plateau of organisation, in the sense that that moment points to a stabilisation of something that is essentially unstable and chaotic.

This can perhaps be more straightforwardly shown in relation to Laclau and Mouffe's deconstruction of the Marxist categories in *HSS*. Showing, as they have done, how the terrain of the social does not attain closure but is an ever-incomplete, indeterminate structure, represents an important step in the subversion of Marxism's claim to the mastery of the social, thereby opening the way for alternative or different political ideas (such as radical democracy) to circulate. However, rather than Laclau's account of indetermination, I suggest that the category of 'undecidability' is of importance when one wants to question what is at stake in democratic politics. This is because it reveals the impossibility of establishing a consensus without exclusion, presenting all stabilisations and

decisions as 'moments' in which the field of difference and antagonism is temporarily arrested. By pointing to the inerradicability of differentiation and antagonism, I argue that undecidability is not only fundamental for politics and for decision-making, but it also provides the very terrain in which other kinds of democratic politics can be both thought and formulated. Thus, as J. Hillis Miller has pointed out, while Laclau identifies the 'trace of contingency and indeterminacy within a given social structure' as the very possibility of the political decision (1996), this moment of decision is always, for Laclau, grounded in the 'rational' and 'creative act' of the subject and its coming-in-to-being. Accordingly, Miller argues that:

. . . Laclau's theory of political change for the better cannot do without the recuperation of the subject or 'I' that decides, arbitrarily and without justification, but nevertheless rationally and logically in the midst of what Laclau calls 'regulated' madness (*'the madness of the decision is, if you want, a regulated one'*) to undertake some specific historical task (Hillis Miller, 2004: 224).<sup>3</sup>

For Laclau, the 'deciding subject' gives itself content by identifying itself with the futurity of some social group, political party, or with some specific task or demand. Thus, his account of radical democracy is presented in terms of a hegemonic struggle, wherein a plurality of democratic struggles against different forms of subordination (racism, sexual discrimination, homophobia, environmental degradation and so forth) is articulated in the building of a new left-wing hegemonic project.<sup>4</sup>

In the context of Laclau's hegemonic project, a 'new' political decision is therefore always made by a rationally logical 'I' that sees its chance to intervene in the historical process and takes it (Ibid.). However, what makes Derrida's account of the political decision potentially more radical is that, according to Miller, it is understood as a response to a call from the 'wholly other' – for instance, not from *within* the free market/anti-capitalism opposition, but something introduced to that binary from *outside*, a new – perhaps unanticipated – antagonism that demands a new way of thinking about the free market/anti-capitalism dichotomy. For Derrida, as for Miller, a decision is always in one way or another a performative act, and such acts are neither amenable to the logic of constative statements (i.e. true/false, right/wrong) nor do they belong to the order of cognition: you never know what a



decision is going to bring about (Ibid.: 225). Thus, while for Laclau a decision is made in the context of the subjects (that is, you or I) identification with a specific kind of struggle – from anti-racism to anti-capitalism – in Derrida's account such a decision must itself remain open to the 'other', and to the possibility of another or different decision.

For example, to build on the above illustration, if I identify myself in line with the so-called anti-capitalist movement and I make political decisions according to that movement's critical stance towards big business, market deregulation and the corporatisation of public life, then, following Laclau's argument, my decision would constitute one more chain in the building of a hegemonic project. But for Derrida, this process of identification [with the anti-capitalist movement] is at the same time a process of 'disidentification': while I identify with the arguments of the anti-capitalist struggle I am also aware that, in doing so, I am re-making the process of decision-making itself. That is to say, I do not 'belong' to the anti-capitalist movement because, in the process of decision-making, that struggle is itself opened up to 'other' ways of thinking, acting and deciding the meaning of that struggle. A quote from the Notes from Nowhere collective usefully encapsulates this contention. They write:

What is needed is not for more people to become activists, but for the everyday fabric of society to become engaged. That involves risking our own identity as a movement . . . It's only through letting go of our precious identities, letting go of our egos and our subcultures, that we can remove the limits we place upon our own achievements (Notes from Nowhere, 2003: 510).

This is why, in Derrida's account of the political decision, the notion of undecidability can be understood to suggest a more radical alterity. Undecidability is crucial to the decision-making process precisely because it keeps open this sense of 'otherness' – a way of thinking and acting in a different way. In the context of the anti-capitalist movement the theme of undecidability can therefore be said to 'reinvest' the politicality of that movement in two crucial ways. Firstly, it challenges the notion of political paralysis as a condition of forward movement – a point emphasised by Stanley Aronowitz regarding the danger of a particular social movement 'setting the agenda for left politics' (1992), and described more recently by Geert Lovink as the 'tendency for political movements to become stuck in a self-satisfying protest mode'

(2002). And secondly, it also redefines – and thus potentially opens out – the terrain of the political and the democratic by continually suffusing those categories with new and different meanings.

Following Derrida and Miller, I therefore argue that the disclosure of the undecidability of radical democracy actually offers the prospect of a more thorough-going questioning of the nature and character of politicality. This is because it not only call attention to the inherent indeterminacy of all political decisions; but it also suggests the potential 'reanimation' of politics itself, since it permits us to *think* the political and the democratic by granting us the space so as to not be enclosed in any definitive explanation or understanding of the latter. Accordingly, I suggest that a crucial problem with Laclau and Mouffe's account of radical democracy is their failure (to some extent due to their conception of what, for them, actually constitutes politicality) to question more thoroughly that category's own internal antagonisms as radical spaces of democratic possibility, in and of themselves. The fact that the 'projects' that radical democratic politics are engaged – or engages – in are merely struggles or sites of antagonism which both constitute a basis for 'action' (for the very idea of a 'project' as such) and redefine any such specific project. In other words, any project that comprises a *theory* of radical democracy can only really be an 'open' project. Not *simply* open. But open in the sense that, of necessity, that project/action/decision recognises the problematics, contradictions and uncertainties of openness itself. So, from the outset, I argue that one thing a contemporary radical democratic politics needs to accept is its own impossibility, and likewise that of its critical energies and categories. In so doing, by accepting the problematics of such key categories as difference, plurality and otherness, all of which are crucial in any account of radical democracy, it is then possible to consider how they might function in different and potentially more radical ways.

## 2.6 CONCLUSION.

The criticism that I have levelled at Laclau and Mouffe in this chapter is that their account of politics and the political decision is so closely grounded in the notion of radical democracy as the 'multiplication of public spaces' *as they are* as to be conceptually – and thus politically – limited. As such, they are unable to think about politics and subjectivity and democracy in *different* and *other* ways, ways not necessarily immanent to the liberal democratic form of life – its institutions, practices, struggles and demands. An example of this can be seen in Mouffe's

book *The Democratic Paradox* (2000). In this book she, correctly in my view, seeks to articulate a position that goes beyond rational consensus, deliberative models of democracy. One weakness that Mouffe identifies with the Habermasian-inspired deliberative approach is that, by postulating the availability of a public sphere where power would have been eliminated and where a rational consensus could be realised, it is unable to acknowledge the dimension of antagonism that the pluralism of values entails and its ineradicable character. In order to remedy this deficiency she therefore proposes a more radical model of democracy which places the question of difference and disagreement at its very centre, subsequently affirming the legitimisation of relations of power and antagonism as being constitutive of the specificity of the social (as the terrain where politics takes place). Mouffe's central proposition that 'agonistic' democracies negotiate the antagonisms that underpin sociality is, however, one that is predicated on the maintenance of the state as modern complex of institutions and the contending forms of citizenship and identification that go towards extending those institutions as spaces of radical democratic articulation. Accordingly, Mouffe has not made the passage into the post-fordist state and its connection with capital's flexible modes of production and accumulation (Ray & Sayer, 1999). The informationisation of social relations, the expansion of the ICTs and networks, the various discourses surrounding digital and knowledge-led capitalism (Schiller, 1999; Graham, 2000), none of these factors are afforded critical reflection in Mouffe's thesis on agonistic democracy. As such, she is unable to describe the new modes of sociality, labour, communication and politics as they are organised within increasingly networked societies and information-rich economies (Rossiter, 2004). For Mouffe, a 'well functioning democracy' is simply that which calls for a 'vibrant clash of political positions and identities' (Mouffe, 2000: 104).

On the basis of this exposition, any association between a 'radical democratic thinking' and the ICTs may seem problematic, perhaps even contradictory to the thesis I am presenting. But my plea for indulgence with this nexus of democracy and technology quickly gains credibility when one considers new ways of thinking about these two categories. For instance, in Laclau and Mouffe's post-Marxist appraisal, democratic theory centres on the *impossibility* of eradicating conflict in favour of consensus. This approach regards conflict and antagonism as not only possible but *vital* components in the formation of a democratic community. A radical democratic vista, therefore, foregrounds the diversity of overlapping and contrasting communities (as opposed to a single, homogeneous community) in any



social formation and seeks to account for their articulation in 'antagonistic' rather than moral terms. In this way, one may characterise radical democracy as that which opens up new positions of speech, empowering previously excluded groups and enabling new dimensions of social life to become part of the political process.

Such an initiative may, on first impressions, seem inappropriate to the Internet, since it is premised on the extension of existing political institutions and identities rather than a rethinking of those positions in relation to new conditions, such as those occasioned by the ICTs. However, this in no way precludes the ethico-political principles of radical democracy, particularly on the themes of [democratic] possibility, the non-closure of possibility, and hence the radical extension of possibility as a political and democratic responsibility, from having a purchase on our discernment on the potentiality of the ICTs. Above all, what it suggests is the requirement to *think* those principles relative to new instances of politicisation and new democratic narratives in order to make sense of new patterns of force and relations emerging in certain constituents of the ICTs and networked culture.

To keep the category of radical democracy both 'alive' and 'pertinent' it must, therefore, be capable of providing new explanations and theories of contemporary democratic politics. A central virtue of Laclau and Mouffe's conception of democracy is that it *does* emphasise the 'ethos' of democracy, not simply the institution or organisation of democracy, in and of itself. This shift transforms democracy, now conceived as a radical democratic ethos or 'idea', into a site of further research and enquiry about how to make our understanding of its conditions more theoretically apposite to new types of practises and emergent cultures of politics. This is particularly the case when one thinks about the instantiation of new conditions and new types of relationships and political subjectivities associated with the expansion of the ICTs and networks, which have as yet not been considered in relation to a radical democratic thinking. My next chapter will therefore show how the relationship between radical democracy and ICT-centred politics can open up new possibilities for radical democratic theories of politics.

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<sup>1</sup> Norman Geras, 'Post-Marxism?' *New Left Review*, 163, May/June 1987, pp. 40 – 82 (reprinted in S. Sim, ed. 1998).

<sup>2</sup> Stanley Aronowitz, 'Theory and Social Strategy', *Social Text*, 1986/7, pp. 1 – 16 (reprinted in S. Sim ed. 1998).

<sup>3</sup> *Italicised* reference from Laclau (1996).

<sup>4</sup> See Laclau and Mouffe's preface to the 2001 edition of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, pp. vii – xix.

## CHAPTER 3.

### THE EXTENSION OF RADICAL DEMOCRATIC THEORIES OF POLITICS.

Having clarified, both in my first and second chapters, why I think that reconsidering the ideas of radical democracy may be more appropriate to our understanding of the new kinds of democratic cultures of politics, in this chapter I present a number of ways of extending the theories of democracy and technology. In the preceding chapter I suggested that Laclau and Mouffe's account of 'the political' was so closely grounded in the notion of radical democracy as the 'multiplication of public spaces' *as they are* as to be conceptually – and thus politically – limited. I further argued that this restricted their thinking about politics and democracy in *different* and *other* ways, ways not necessarily immanent to the liberal democratic form of life. However, having presented this criticism of Laclau and Mouffe's position, it is appropriate to offer some examples of how and in what ways we might actually being to *think* the relationship between democracy, politics and the ICTs in other ways. What I attempt to do in this chapter is, therefore, to outline some of the ways in which the ICTs are enabling new modes of communication, interaction and activism that are radically redrawing our understanding of the ways in which politics is being played and animated today. This chapter concludes by setting out the crucial role of these ICT-mediated politics in shaping new radical democratic theories of politics that are more responsive to the challenges of neoliberal globalisation.

Other potential interpretations of radical democratic politics have been identified. These include a number of 'alternative' readings and ideas of democratic organisation. Drawing on insights from the literature on social movement theory (McAdam et al, 2001; Diani and McAdam, 2003), deliberative and participative democracy (Habermas, 1996; Rawls, 2001; Khan and Kellner, 2005) and global civil society (Keane, 2003; Hart and Negri, 2000, 2004; Hassan, 2004), these nascent politics occasions a refocused model of democracy. This model of democracy has been thought through, amongst others, the social forums, gatherings and global protest events, where issues of 'space', 'networks' and 'agency' come to the fore. The characteristics of this model – dispersed, nonlinear, processual, and mutable – are mediated through the proliferation of ICTs and transnational networks, offering multiple points of organisation where democratic initiatives can be practiced and their affinity with resistance to prevailing agglomerations of power (political, economic, cultural, state, corporate and so on)



potentially deepened. At the heart of this contested terrain of ICT-centred politics (or 'technopolitics') lies what I contend is an identifiable praxis: a self-organising dynamic that generates an immense pull on other social and political actors through the mediation of a politics that privileges the formation of new socialities and relations, novel forms of political action and differential articulations of democratic struggle.

This new thinking of politics clearly represents a break with more traditional forms of democratic political struggle. It entertains the notion that politics does not simply consist of parties, opposition, 'legitimacy' through governance and institutionalisation and the production of rationally-derived policies but is characterised in different ways. It is taking shape through the (dis)organised, decentralised and nomadic forms that characterise the nascent wave of 'technopolitics' – the anti-corporate/capitalist protests, Internet activism such as ECD and communication practices including P2P, Blogging and open publishing. Another thinking of democratic organisation is therefore paramount. For if we remain tied to a *fixed* and *certain* understanding of democracy we may miss important developments, including changes in the form and character of politics as well as the possibilities to shape those changes.

### 3.1 THE 'DIRECTION' OF RADICAL DEMOCRACY.

What is the bearing of radical democracy in the increasingly networked topographies of the early twenty-first century? How can we *think* the politics of radical democracy relative to the variable conditions of network culture and the ICTs, and the frequently incommensurate situations of neoliberal globalisation? Any response to these questions can only, of course, be provisional, since a central argument of my thesis is that radical democracy is in fact uniquely capable of extending the terrain for any number of contributions. Radical democratic theory can itself engender new kinds of politicisation, precisely because it grants us the space in which to think politics and democracy in other ways. My argument is that the category of radical democracy enables, and indeed actively extends scope for, a reflection on the nature of the political and the democratic, in that way awakening a new moment or 'space' of politicisation that can itself have a progressive and repoliticising effect. This way of thinking about democracy can in many ways be considered as analogous to Derrida's account of 'hyperpoliticisation'. By pursuing an appraisal of the emerging cultures of politics and practice conditioned through

new modes of consumption, communication and organisation, my approach can be said to be that of the order of the 'hyperpolitical'. Derrida explains this in the following way:

Hyperpoliticising [means] following paths and codes which are clearly not traditional . . . by permit[ting] us to think the political and think the democratic by granting us the space necessary in order not to be enclosed in the latter. In order to pose the question of the political, it is necessary to draw something from the political and the same from democracy . . .  
(Derrida in Mouffe, 1996: 85).

In an increasingly networked world, where the field of the political has splintered into a million pieces (Hassan, 2004), a hyperpolitical thesis is of critical (in both senses of the word) importance for grasping what is at stake in contemporary democratic politics. Not only does it facilitate a reflection on the nature and character of the political and the democratic, but it also grants us the space in which to rethink those categories as they follow new directions and 'other' meanings

A central virtue of the outlined approach is that it emphasises the *ethos* of democracy, not simply the institution or institutions of democracy. Thus, as I have shown elsewhere, even though Laclau and Mouffe situate their own conception of radical democracy within an appraisal of the liberal democratic 'form of life', and so give emphasis to the political possibilities of this formation through a validation of its 'institutions, discourses and practices' (Mouffe, 2000b), they also call attention to the *indeterminate* and *undecidable* character of democracy – the fact that, in their account, democracy necessarily makes explicit the contingency of its foundations and operations (i.e. its 'political' and hence 'hyperpolitical' character). The potential for the development of new and 'other' kinds of politics and their role in the promotion of new contexts of democratic organisation is therefore enlivened.

For Mouffe, this emphasis on the contingent and undecidable nature of democracy is in fact the *condition* of political possibility. She explains that uncertainty should not make us feel politically impotent, but should in fact be seen as at once extending the terrain of the political while at the same time removing the grounds for complacency and inactivity in any field (Mouffe, 1996). This is precisely the basis on which Laclau and Mouffe identify the *possibilities* of the category of radical democracy as being contingent upon a 'proliferation of new subjects of change' and

on the discernment of 'new antagonisms [as] new horizons of democratic possibility' (Laclau, 1990). The bearing of radical democratic theory is therefore to be found in its resistance to a full or final realisation – its *radical incompleteness* (Butler, 2000).

Butler employs this notion of *radical incompleteness* to explain how [radical democratic] theory must, for the sake of political possibility, remain open to a radical questioning. Here she makes the point that a *commitment* to a radical questioning of the 'political' is contingent on there being 'no moment in which politics necessitates the denouement of theory'. Butler argues that any 'movement towards the "end of theory" . . . would be the moment in which politics posits certain premises as off-limits to questioning' (2000: 264). Thus, by pursuing a critical interrogation of the 'political', she argues, it will be possible to condition a more radical service of that category and its 'meanings' for radical democratic politics more generally (Ibid.). Accordingly, Butler does not argue for the production of a new political discourse or 'manifesto' (in a Marxian vein *pace* Hardt & Negri). Rather, her articulation of new radical democratic forms of politics entails the commitment to a conception of democratic possibility which is futural, which remains unconstrained by teleology, and which, through a continual appraisal and thus re-animation of the 'political', 'remain[s], in some permanent way, unrealisable' (Ibid.: 268). This valorisation of unrealisability, of the constant deferral of the *arrival* of democracy, can be found in several contemporary thinkers whose political sentience is shaped in part from the resources of post-Marxist and post-structuralist theory, and argued in various ways by Laclau, Mouffe, Butler, Gilbert, Derrida and Miller, not to mention my own parentheses in this thesis.

That is not to suggest that the above authors are in complete agreement on what the category of radical democracy does, could or might possibly mean. Indeed in both my first and second chapters a number of critical differences between them were identified (see also, Mouffe, 1996; Butler et al, 2000; Critchley and Marchart, 2004). However, what the above accounts of radical democracy do at least share is a perception of that category as permanently – and hence radically – contested and contestable. As Paul Bowman has written:

[For Laclau and Mouffe] democracy *promises* to be the best means of assuring that any injustice, exploitation, and oppression can be countered, and that *all* power be accountable, precisely because democratic principles



contain within themselves the basis of their own critique and contestation (Bowman, 2002: 799).

If the political and the democratic can be seen as permanently 'unstable' categories, comprising within themselves the basis of their own questioning, then one conclusion that can be drawn from this consists in the opening out of those categories to 'other' possibilities, 'other' ways of being conceived. This shift translates *democracy*, now understood as a radical democratic ethos, into a site of further research and enquiry. It is this aspect of the radical democratic analysis, in particular, that can be considered in relation to new conceptions of, and thus new ways of thinking about, the political and the democratic.

Radical democracy clearly, therefore, contains critical potentials through which to examine phenomena like the Internet in relation to emergent practices of communication, consumption and interaction and the means by which they hold open the possibility of other ways of conceiving democracy, the political and politics more appropriate to an increasingly 'networked' society. This necessarily entails the thinking of a number of different ways of thinking about radical democracy. This difference lies in the affirmation of practices and values that are internal to the formation of new relations and technics of politics and organisation in networks. And it is this emphasis on the nexus of theoretical and political openness that I want the following discussion of politics, democracy and the ICTs to be understood.

### **3.2 NETWORKS OF POLITICS.**

The political landscape of the ICTs is becoming increasingly complex, and to some extent taking on its own novel character, building on prior forms of political activity as well as transforming them. The new cultures and relations of politics that I have described in my first chapter bear this out. The emergence of new forms of political practice and activism mediated through the ICTs, such as the anti-capitalist, anti-corporate and global justice movements, as well as new types of communication practices, including peer-to-peer file sharing, blogging and 'hypertextual archives' or 'wikis', can all be said to at least give weight to the claim of the 'materialisation of the Internet [as a] vital oppositional space of alternative politics, cultures and voices' (Khan & Kellner, 2005). New political cultures are finding far more 'public' forums and are being more widely spread through new media than through the ever more commercialised 'fourth estate' (Curran and Couldry, 2003). It is easier for someone

to immerse oneself in an array of opinions, surround oneself with networks of both like minded and contrary participants, and to assert a place in public/political culture by establishing a page and links. In this sense, one may say that the ICTs makes possible 'interactive spaces', including chatrooms, email, listserves, instant messaging and weblogs, that can be said to contribute to the formation of critical and differential public spheres (Dean, 2001).

Some commentators have characterised ICTs such as the Internet as something like a contested terrain, used by left, right and centre, both by dominant groups and by innumerable subcultures, in order to promote their own agendas and interests. Steve Best and Douglas Kellner have pursued this line of reasoning, suggesting that the Internet can be used effectively by a variety of political formations and groups: the Zapatistas, neo-Nazis, and terrorist groups alike, may further their political ambitions by means of web pages, listserves, chat rooms weblogs and so forth (2001). In heavily mediatised – particularly Western – societies political candidates of all persuasions use the Internet for their advantage, for self-promotion as well as for so-called 'dirty tricks'.<sup>1</sup> Reform movements in China and Eastern Europe have depended on the Internet – as well as email and mobile phones – to disseminate their literature and foster political change (Downing et al, 2001; Meikle, 2002). Numerous experiments which utilise the Internet to extend the democratic process have also been spoken about, such as electronic voting and online polling (Alvarez & Hall, 2003), while the majority of local authorities in the UK have some form of web presence (Gibson & Ward, 2000). And the anti-globalisation/WTO demonstrations in Seattle in 2000, as well as subsequent gatherings in Washington, London, Prague and Genoa, also benefited by an evolving sense of the way in which the Internet may be deployed to assist the work of organising political protest (Klein, 2002). These examples suggest the way in which the Internet can function within existing political structures, though often in quite divergent ways, adding an 'additional twist in the ongoing saga of technopolitics' (Khan & Kellner, 2004).

John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt have taken the argument concerning the ICTs as a contested terrain a step further with their description of 'Netwars' (2002). They employ the term Netwar to characterise an 'emerging mode of very different kinds of political conflict', ranging from terrorist and criminal organisation to militant social activists, but all of which draw on the same combination of social networks, sophisticated communication technologies and decentralised organisational

structures. Arquilla and Ronfeldt argue that both 'civil' and 'uncivil' society is increasingly engaging this new way of fighting:

From the 'Battle of Seattle' to the 'Attack on America', and from Chechen rebels in Russia to football hooligans in Europe . . . what all [these networks] have in common is that they operate in small, dispersed units that can deploy nimbly – anywhere, anytime. All feature networked forms of organisation, doctrine, strategy, and technology that are attuned to the information age. The tactics they use range from battles of ideas to acts of sabotage – and many tactics involve the Internet (2002: 310 – 3).

However, although networked-structured communications are seen as holding genuine potential for enabling democratic forms of decision-making and beneficial instances of collective action, Arquilla and Ronfeldt are quick to point out that these networked forms of social organisation may not have uniformly munificent outcomes. On the one hand, they suggest the potential for cooperation in examples like non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that use Netwar tactics for public benefit. Illustrations of this might include organisations such as ConflictNet and PeaceNet, networks committed to promoting the constructive resolution of conflict through the continuity of dialogue ([www.igc.org/](http://www.igc.org/)). However, they also articulate a robust caution against those who might anticipate the emergence of a new form of organisation led by 'good guys' who do 'the right thing' and grow stronger because of it:

History does not support this contention. The cutting edge in the early rise of a new form may be found equally among malcontents, ne'er-do-wells, and clever opportunists eager to take advantage of new ways to manoeuvre, exploit and dominate (Ibid.).

In light of the manifold applications of Netwar tactics, it would be naïve to presume that only benign outcomes should be expected from networked forms of social organisation. But the challenge of Netwar, according to Arquilla and Ronfeldt, is to explore its 'collaborative possibilities: the potential for 'cooperative epidemics' to break out beyond the warriors and anarchists to citizens, journalists, scientists, customers and so forth. Drawing on Alexis de Tocqueville's observation regarding early nineteenth-century America that 'the best informed inhabitants of each district constantly use their information to discover new knowledge which may augment the



general prosperity' (Mayer & Lerner, 1966), they see 'organised conflict' as a site of intensive cooperation – providing that the right conditions can be created for the benefit of one's fellow citizens.

Arquilla and Ronfeldt's description of 'organised conflict' can be said to share a resonance with the theory of a tactical media. David Garcia and Geert Lovink make the case for a tactical media that enables individuals and groups to use media and communication technologies 'tactically' (1997). Their 'do-it-yourself' manifesto for media activism reflects a growing concern with the dominance of corporate influences on media usage, arguing that 'we', as 'everyday' media and technology users, need to become proficient 'media tacticians' capable of 'finding creative and innovative ways of using the products used by the dominant information-based order'. For them, being 'tactical' is more than an act of resistance'; it is an 'active production' – a set of practices that seek to establish new modes of existence through the expanding resources of new media technologies. And as Lovink has gone on to argue in a later essay with Florian Schneider, through the 'tactical' use of networks and ICTs activists can become more aware of the value of these temporary reversals in the flow of power. Rather than resisting these rebellions 'they do everything in their power to amplify them . . . [to] make the creation of spaces, channels and platforms for these reversals central to their practice' (Lovink and Schneider, 2002). And it is this dynamic model of 'tactics as production' that, as Lovink has argued in a recent essay, can become the catalyst for the debates around the developing global civil society 'movement of movements', which new media activists and artists are still at the very beginning of formulating ideas and demands about (Lovink, 2004).

The emergence of this 'networked' movement has, according to Lovink and Schneider, brought about an even more robust theory of tactical media (2002). 'It is enough to understand the new dynamics [of networks], they argue, and use them [to] create and disseminate your message with all available logics, tools and media (Ibid.: 317). This 'rigorous application of networking methods', or 'net activism' as they call it, is giving rise to a new kind of civil society which is fundamentally dependent on the use of ICTs to achieve new individual and collective ends. Lovink and Schneider argue that the ubiquity of 'networks upon networks' and ICTs constitute the basis on which alternative groups and movements form through their use of the same decentralised applications and technologies. From the 'direct action training' of the Ruckus Society (<http://www.ruckus.org/index2.html>) and the

'anti-brand activism' of Adbusters to the guerrilla tactics of RTMark and CAE and the network of collectively run media outlets that is Indymedia.org, current forms of activism suggest a 'redefinition of sabotage and subversion as social practice, but not in the usual destructive sense, rather in a constructive, innovative and creative practice' (Ibid.: 315 – 6). This innovation and creativity, they argue, emerges as a kind of 'amorphous energy' from a 'a movement without organs or organisation' (Ibid.: 315). Challenging the erstwhile perception of political change sustained around centralised parties, power consolidation and hierarchical leadership, this 'hybridised movement' (from anarchists, socialists and environmentalists to intellectuals, students and journalists) is argued to better understand, and hence more capable of responding to, the workings of decentralised, diverse interconnected networks within networks, where everything is in a state of flux (Klein, 2002: 5 – 6).

However, a number of problems have been identified with the theory of this movement. One particular problem, one which I think relates directly to the question of democratic potential, is the context in which this 'hybridised movement' can be defined through established modes of opposition and organisation (i.e. as 'alternative'). Michael Hardt has argued that the term 'alternative' is an inappropriate description to carry over from the domain of radical 'oppositional' politics to the ICTs and networks (2002). On the Internet one may no longer see the requirement to proceed through traditional modes of opposition and organisation. One of the basic characteristics of a network architecture, as Michael Hardt reminds us, is that no two nodes face each other in contradiction; rather they are always triangulated by third, and then by a fourth, and then by an infinite number of others in the web. The 'condition' of operating in a 'networks of networks' is that it may displace conventional oppositions and positions, moving instead in a kind of 'alchemy' that is, strictly speaking, neither an 'alternative to' nor a 'substitute for' the dominant or hegemonic mode of politics but its own particular movement and translation.

An additional problem with the 'alternative' label is that it risks reproducing the anti-democratic logic of radical individualism. Of becoming what Jeremy Gilbert, following Laclau and Mouffe, has described as a form of 'enclave politics', in which the defence of one's political difference takes precedence over the universal value of the right to such differences (i.e. democracy) (Gilbert, 2001). That is to say, while the alternative label inevitably points up the 'differentiality' of a position

relative to a perceived other (i.e. left/right, alternative/mainstream and so forth), it may also tend towards defining *exclusively* the subjectivity of that position rather than defending and extending the conditions in which 'difference' and 'otherness' may transpire (the conditions that democracy requires if it is to be 'radicalised').

The somewhat unsatisfactory 'anti-globalisation' label is a good example of this. The movements included under this banner tend to construct their arguments according to some 'definitive' kind of analysis of the effects of globalisation. The tendency of these movements towards both exclusivity, and a view of global development as a mixture of American imperialism and corporate greed, makes them vulnerable to a shift of opinion from indifference of the majority to an at least potentially hostile questioning of the grounding of their opinions. Thus, while anti-capitalist/globalisation movements may have 'named the enemy' (Starr 2000), questions need to be asked about their potential to challenge neoliberal capitalism, and some of the 'alternative' visions that are embraced – and whether some of these should be rejected. Naomi Klein has herself pointed to the limitations of certain forms of action associated with the anti-capitalist/globalisation movements (2002). She describes how, in April 2000, a blockade of the streets surrounding the IMF and World Bank headquarters in Washington collapsed as each intersection of the blockade declared autonomy. The effect was that some continued the blockade while others did not, which made it completely ineffective – delegates to the official meetings simply went down a street which was no longer blockaded. For Klein this was a metaphor for the strengths and weaknesses of the movement, arguing that the activist network around websites and e-mails "is better at speed and volume than at synthesis" (2002: 152).

Klein's critique therefore goes some way to reinforcing my earlier claim regarding the 'democratic potential' of the movements included under a catch-all banner of 'alternative'. And, moreover, whether 'being alternative' is actually antithetical to democratic objectives. This criticism can, I think, be broadened to include some demonstrations of tactical media. In particular the DIY/pragmatic emphasis of tactical media, with its emphasis on 'hit and run' practices and its frequent allusion to the language of 'warfare' (pace Arquilla and Ronfeldt) and 'terrorism' (which I consider in chapter four).<sup>2</sup> The emergence of new networked forms of politics – or 'technopolitics' – that are being forged and mediated through ICTs like the Internet raise new political questions about the nature and character of contemporary democratic politics. The 'alternative' nomenclature is not, in and of itself, sufficient



to describe and account for them. To remedy this shortfall in the theory of networked politics a more strategic dimension is required. This is necessary in order to broach the question of how these new political cultures can be considered in terms of their democratic potential.

### **3.3 STRATEGIES IN NETWORKS.**

In his book *A Hacker Manifesto* McKenzie Wark provides a more strategic account of politics in networks (2004).<sup>3</sup> Here he engages a theory of Netwar which takes account of new kinds of relations immanent to the logic of networks and the ICTs, and how they inscribe new patterns of conflict and power. Wark's *Manifesto* elucidates a contemporary political movement in a quasi-Marxist framework. His principle aim is to draw attention to the origins, purpose and interests of a new class responsible for constructing and producing the new concepts, perceptions and ideas (what he calls 'abstractions') on which our societies increasingly depend. Wark argues that this new class – what he calls the “vectoral class” – is employing intellectual property (ownership) constructs like patents, copyrights and trademarks to monopolise information production and knowledge dissemination. By controlling how information is accessed, acquired and utilised, the vectoral class has artificially created a new scarce resource – knowledge. This problematic terrain of intellectual property is, he argues, giving rise to a new kind of class conflict; a ‘real’ Netwar that pits the creators of information – the diverse ‘hacker class’ of programmers, artists, writers, musicians, researchers, activists and philosophers – against a possessing class who would monopolise what the hacker produces.

Building on Marx and Engels' lexis, Wark equates the vectoral class to the capitalist factory owners and land owners of Marx-era property conflicts. The copyright and patent, meanwhile, are presented as the modern-day equivalent of farmland and factories. For Wark, hackers should be seen in a similar light to the nineteenth-century peasant farmers and factory workers because the vectoral class controls access to the means of production – i.e. information. Drawing also on the tactical media theory of ‘tactics of practice’, as well as Gilles Deleuze's notion of the ‘untimely’ as the ‘becoming of different lines of perception which disrupt the sense of a shared and unified present’ (Colebrook, 2002), he offers a methodical interpretation of Marxist thought for the era of ICTs and globalisation. In the widespread struggle against commodity property, Wark envisions a utopian potential in the shape of the ‘hacker class’. This new class emerge at the vanguard

of this struggle and are charged with the unique task of articulating a collective-expressive political interest in a new information commons. He writes:

Politics can become expressive only when it is a politics of freeing the virtuality of information. In liberating information from its objectification as a commodity, it liberates also the subjective force of statement. Expressive politics does not seek to overthrow the existing society, or to reform its larger structures, or to preserve its structure so as to maintain an existing coalition of interests. It seeks to permeate existing states with a new state of existence, spreading the seeds of an alternative practice of everyday life (2004: 59).

This formulation allows Wark to synthesize and combine a wide range of insights about the politics and economics of information. As many observers have noted, what used to be an information "commons" is increasingly being privatised. Corporations trademark well-known expressions, copyright texts and data that used to circulate in the public domain, and even patent entire genomes (Klein, 2002; Dean, 2002; Drahos and Braithwaite, 2003). Threatened by the potential of the ICTs to transform the ways both commercial and non-commercial culture is made and shared, corporations have united to induce legislators to use the law to protect them (Lessig, 2004). Nowhere more so than in the Recording Industry Association of America's (RIAA) legal action against individual file sharers for copyright theft. For Lessig, such action constitutes a direct assault on the Internet as a 'public commons' – a resource shared by all that encourages productive collaboration between its users (Ibid.: 9).

For Wark this privatisation of information has become the dominant, rather than a subsidiary, aspect of commodified life. As private property advances from land to capital to information, property itself has become more abstract. As capital frees land from its spatial fixity through networks, information as property frees capital from its fixity in a particular object. However, it is within these very circumstances, Wark claims, that the hacker class finds its 'form'. The hacker class arises out of the

. . . the transformation of information into property, in the form of intellectual property, including patents, trademarks, copyright and the moral right of authors. The hacker class is the class with the capacity to create not only

new kinds of object and subject in the world, not only new kinds of property form in which they may be represented, but new kinds of relation beyond the property form. The formation of the hacker class as a class comes at just this moment when freedom from necessity and from class domination appears on the horizon as a possibility (Ibid.: 16).

What Wark proposes is, in effect, a new political ideology through which to clarify an emerging terrain of democratic struggle wherein the very meaning of a 'commons' in information and knowledge is firmly attributed to the hacker class.

There are two important issues that need to be emphasised with regard to Wark's thesis. On the one hand he is right in his requirement for new kinds of politics that are better able to stand up to the protean conditions of the neoliberal/ICT revolution nexus. To this end Wark has shown how hackers, for instance, may in their own way embrace a new vocabulary and principles to empower their sense of a developing class capable of changing the bounds of property and ownership. By talking about the production of 'abstractions' as the 'potential of potential' - the 'expression of the possibility of new worlds' – Wark clearly sees the emerging principles of the hacker class as residing in the value of difference. In fact, he suggests that 'to hack is always to produce a difference, if only a minute difference, in the production of information'. However, by postulating the collective interest and unity of this emerging hacker class as a *de facto* historical agent formed through a *spontaneous aggregation of a plurality of actions* (2004: 16) Wark's thesis actually negates the affect of difference itself – the condition which *any* democratic vista necessarily entails. Instead, he attributes to the hacker a particular content, a content destined to destroy all barriers to its objective task – the destruction of all forms of commodified property. The full realisation of this subjective presence would, however, mean the elimination of difference – and hence 'democratic potential' – itself, since the postulate of the hacker's emergence as an historical agent is not put into question. For Wark the hacker class merely 'arises out of the transformation of information into property', and so its form *as a class*, and how it articulates its own internal antagonisms and differences *as a class*, are rendered secondary to the epochal struggle it finds itself in.

In this latter case, Wark's thesis can be seen as treading a similar path to Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's account of Empire (2000) and their subsequent



delineation of a 'global multitude' (2004). To mention it again briefly, Hardt and Negri employ the term 'multitude' as a counter-force to the emergence of a new global order which they call Empire. This new political order, as they understand it, refers not to a system in which tribute flows from peripheries to great capital cities; and it is very different from the imperialism of European dominance and capitalist expansion of earlier epochs. Rather, Hardt and Negri describe Empire as a new paradigm of 'all-englobing power' that is fundamentally decentred in nature. Comprising, among others, supranational bodies like the WTO and IMF, multinational corporations as diverse as Microsoft, General Electric, BP and Pfizer, and globally recognisable icons such as Coca Cola, McDonalds and Nokia, this new composition of power is characterised, above all, by 'mobility' and 'adaptability': managing the often capricious processes of globalisation – hybrid identities, flexible hierarchies, plural exchanges and the flows of people, information and capital – through 'modulating networks of command [that] incorporate the entire global realm within its open, expanding frontiers' (2000: xii – xiii). Following Deleuze and Guattari (1987), they argue that the paradox of this new power is that while it unifies every element of social life, it leads to resistance no longer being marginal as it becomes active in the very centre of a society that opens up in networks. And it is 'the multitude' which, according to Hardt and Negri, embodies the very figure of this new pattern of resistance. They write:

[It] is the plural multitude of productive, creative subjectivities of globalisation that have learned to sail on this enormous sea. They are in perpetual motion and they form constellations of singularities and events that impose continual global reconfigurations on the system (Ibid.: 60).

For Hardt and Negri, the political task of the multitude is not simply to resist the passage to Empire and its processes of globalisation; on the contrary, it is to reorganise and redirect those processes towards new ends. The multitude will therefore comprise those struggles to contest and subvert Empire, as well as those to construct a genuine alternative – a 'counter-Empire'. Most of all this involves 'invent[ing] new democratic forms and a new constituent power that will one day take us through and beyond Empire' (Ibid: xv).

What I think is crucially in the balance in the work of both Wark and Hardt and Negri is the construal of 'democratic possibility' itself. In Hardt and Negri's analysis this possibility is grounded in a unique relationship between Empire and the multitude,

whereupon the latter is conceived as the very figure/subject of political certainty that would enable us both to account for the former and to carry us beyond its 'logic of rule'. Similarly for Wark it is the subjective presence of the 'hacker class' which holds out the expressive political possibility for germinating the 'seeds of an alternative practice of everyday life' – the 'informational commons' of cyberspace. The fragmented and dispersed subject emerges collectively to recognise its subjective presence as both the *symptom* of the postmodern conditions of the means of production of information and communication and as the *cause* of their transformation. In both Hardt and Negri's and Wark's theses it is therefore the manifestation and strategic deployment of a universal subject – however reconfigured – that will take us beyond the present to an already imagined future.<sup>4</sup>

### **3.4 SITUATING POLITICS/STRATEGY AS CONDITIONS OF DEMOCRATIC POSSIBILITY.**

A more general problem identified with the above cases is that of their perception of the ICTs as a contested domain with definable boundaries and clear intentions toward which this 'space' may be 'democratically' inscribed. In other words, the service of the ICTs – and the Internet in particular – as 'tools' for democratic struggle. For example, earlier in this essay I drew attention to Khan and Kellner's portrayal of the Internet as an emergent space of culture and politics in which 'new oppositional cultures and novel alternative voices and practices will appear' (2004). On the one hand, it is hard to disagree with a statement of such generality. In recent years there have certainly been growing discussions concerning Internet activism, both in the broadcast and print media as well as in academia, with particular attention given to the ways in which the ICTs have been used effectively by a variety of political movements and groups. To name a few: the Zapatista's use of the Internet to convert a small local struggle for democracy and land into a movement that has caught the attention of activists around the world; the phenomenon of 'flash mobbing', where groups of individuals respond to texts and email summons to appear in specific sites to carry out particular actions; and the United for Peace and Justice organisation ([www.unitedforpeace.org/](http://www.unitedforpeace.org/)), a network of local social-rights movements which emerged largely in response to the international policy decisions of the so-called 'coalition of the willing' (America, Britain, Spain, etc.). Even the actions of the road hauliers' protest in the UK in 2000, which used mobile phones and email to coordinate a widely dispersed set of activities (road blocks, lorry 'go slows', etc.), and the highly public and visual actions

of the Fathers for Justice movement demonstrate an awareness of the importance of ICTs and 'media savvy' in the realm of contemporary politics. Add to this the emerging theories of tactical media, Netwar and 'the multitude' and you have some compelling examples of new kinds of politics in which the media, ICTs and networks take centre stage. According to Khan and Kellner:

The political battles of the future may well be fought in the streets, factories, parliaments, and other sites of past struggles, but politics is already mediated by broadcast, computer, and information technologies and will be so increasingly in the future. Therefore, those interested in the politics and culture of the future should be clear on the important role of the new public spheres and intervene accordingly . . . [in particular] online activist subcultures have emerged as a vital new space of politics and culture in which a wide diversity of individuals and groups have used emergent technologies in order to help produce new social relations and new forms of political possibility (2004: 94).

If we pick up on Khan and Kellner's last statement then 'online activity', and the Internet more generally, is conceived in terms of a 'new space of politics and culture' – in effect a new public sphere (of spheres). To this end, they cite examples in which the Internet functions 'strategically' to affect new types of political movements that are unique to it. For instance, they show how the protests that took place in Seattle in 1999 fostered a new way of 'acting politically': 'the diverse amalgams of social movements and subcultures that have matured along with the ICTs [are] demonstrative of the Internet as a living, historical force' (Ibid.: 88). In these cases opposition to corporate actions and state policies – was organised primarily through the Internet. In this sense, the Internet is both conceived of, and functions within, existing political frameworks. In other words, Khan and Kellner see the strategic potential of the 'new spaces' of Internet subcultures as at once reproducing and reinvigorating – albeit in a 'high tech' fashion – existing relations of political dispute and contestation, i.e. dominant/alternative, mainstream/oppositional, private/public, etc.

However, whilst not rejecting Khan and Kellner's claim concerning the Internet as a 'new space of politics and culture', other areas of the Internet are less easy to contain within this mode of thought. John Frow, for instance has challenged the notion of the Internet as discernible 'space'. Rather, he reminds us that it is a



'network of networks, the very essence of which is to be both dispersed and partially convergent' (Frow, 2001). The 'thing' about the Internet, he suggests, is that for the most part it elides a straightforward description, at least in terms of an identifiable and orderly arrangement, where each thing is in one place and has clear and identifiable relations by coordinates to all other things. In this sense, the Internet is not really a 'space' at all. Instead, Frow prefers to see the Internet as a *dynamic* and *interactive* information storage and retrieval system. However, even this explanation is somewhat vague and indiscriminate (for instance, is the internet always interactive? Can it ever be passive?), and so requires a more thorough consideration.

In general terms, the notion of 'interactivity' on the Internet can be likened to the way in which a message is sent to a large number of participants which in turn may be responded to by an individual or by many individuals from any location. But this description doesn't in itself differentiate it from, say, interactive digital television, which, if they have the requisite equipment, can be accessed through 'any' receivers' remote control handset, mobile telephone or email account. In the context of the spatio-temporal dimensions of the Internet, 'interactivity' can perhaps be more specifically relayed to the way in which this 'network of networks' interweaves different modes of communication, culture and organisation that can be asserted and felt at any level of scale. For instance, Tiziana Terranova explains how this interweaving of new forms of communication and organisation constitutes an emergent 'digital culture' of activism and cyber-organising on the net (2004). Across the 'cybercultural' landscape of mailing lists, discussion groups, and e-zines, she describes how this emergent culture is giving shape to new kinds of political subjects and forms of 'networked intelligence' in which individuals no longer form an amorphous mass, but interact instead in a fractal ecology of social niches and microniches. Challenging the notion of the Internet as a 'fixed' and 'inevitable' space, Terranova's account of 'micropolitical' sites of 'self-organisation' and 'virtual activism' shows how this interaction of experiences, structures and networks is distinguished by different forms adapted to different communities of users, often with different intentions.

Terranova's account of the 'interactive' dynamics of networks provides, I think, a more subtle understanding of the forces at work shaping the Internet, and of the range of actions and responses open to its producers and users. Not only does the examination of these nonlinear networks raise the issue of a new understanding of

technology – both as a tool, as a social space, and as a cultural spectacle – but this also leads to a reconsideration of the political aspects of ICTs like the Internet. Unlike the ‘party’ or the political movement, new forms of ‘networked’ organisation are highly decentralised, not focused in any initial sense or conventionally formed. Small and informal, disorganised or sporadic in nature, these new types of practices of consumption (such as peer-to-peer file sharing), organised networks (open publishing networks, listserves) and political cultures are mediated by the uneven and ‘networked’ character of the Internet, coming apart and regrouping, and combining and reshaping in ways that undermine contexts of clear or systemic subjectivity and understandings of social change. The potential of the Internet can, along these lines, be said to contribute to what Frow and Terranova have similarly described as the formation of a genuinely dispersed ‘network culture’ within which ‘other’ – often incompatible – kinds of democratic politics can emerge.

Therefore, if the ‘network of networks’ that comprise the Internet can be said to constitute a ‘new terrain of politics’ (*pace* Khan and Kellner), then it is an uneven terrain of conflicting interests and values. This also entails the emergence of different patterns of power and force, and political relations and identities, which require new modes of thought to be developed and elaborated. However, such modes of thought cannot be confined to thinking merely in terms of a strategic action and the ‘figure’ that would, of necessity, carry this action out (as in the ‘hacker class’ or ‘multitude’). In an era of networked interaction and Internet communications, it is the discussion of *another* politics which brings to the fore a new way of thinking about what new forms of communication and organisation might mean for our understanding of democratic politics. This interlocution of *other* ways of thinking about politics is multiform: not only does it point to ways in which notions of subjectivity and identity may be demonstrated by individuals and groups in and through ‘networks of networks’ (networks as ‘tools’ to service struggle), but it also suggests the emergence of new kinds of relations and political subjectivities as ‘reflexive’ and ‘interactive’ processes, often enacted through interconnection or ‘hypertextuality’ with other networks. The democratic potential of this mode of technopolitics turns on its capacity to confront the complexities and antagonisms that comprise the uneven spatio-temporal dimensions and practices of networks.

In this sense both the strategic and the political possibilities of the ICTs continue to be central to the definition of new modes of democratic organisation. The nexus of these two dimensions of technopolitics cannot be reconciled or brought to a

conclusion: 'strategy' amounts to the theoretical impulse to define new contexts of politics; while politics denotes the situations in which that strategy is practically tested and contested. Thus, it is the tension between them that constitutes the 'scene' of democratic struggle, providing the conditions in which politics can be energised and the category of democracy radicalised. Both the strategic application of the ICTs and the utility of those strategies in initiating new ways of thinking about politics and democracy are therefore creatively and critically necessary for enlivening new democratic imaginaries.

### **3.5 NETWORKS OF DEMOCRACY.**

So far in this chapter I have argued that the emergent modes of technopolitics necessitate a more radical vision and understanding of democracy. A number of analyses of technopolitics fail to extend their appraisal of democracy beyond the locus of participation and inclusion and the means by which to strengthen those ties in the pursuit of some prototype of *democracy proper*. Thus, to cite an earlier example, Khan and Kellner have spoken about the Internet's potential as a tool for the 'reconfiguring of politics and culture and the refocusing of participatory democratic politics for everyday life' (2005: 94). While Robert Hassan's account of a 'networked global civil society' strongly reinforces Hardt and Negri's delineation of 'the multitude' as 'giving shape, content and voice to the broad parameters of opinion . . . in which a new and more democratic system can emerge' (2004: 134 – 7).

In my inaugural chapters, I argued that this way of thinking about democracy actually has the counter-effect of impeding that category's radical possibilities. This is because it presupposes that 'thinking about' democracy has already happened, and that political action ensues through the mobilisation of that knowledge. In other words, political action follows the blueprint established by the ideal of *democracy proper*, whether in the form of a 'participatory politics for everyday life' or in the shape of a 'global civil society' that is amorphously administered by 'the multitude'.

However, my central contention is that without an adequate understanding of what is at stake in democracy, it is impossible to address the potential role of ICTs and networks in a fruitful way. If we set out with the assumption that the great advantage of the ICTs is that they make possible the establishment of a 'direct democracy', or a 'consistent politics' in the shape of a global 'multitude', then we will



not be able to visualise the possibilities which they afford for the creation of new forms of organisation and their potential to contribute to the process of articulation of different democratic struggles. The challenge of outlining a more robust, rethought and radical account of democracy is therefore crucial not only for the discussion of technopolitics on a pragmatic level, but for the way in which we understand the 'application' and 'organisation' of a pluralistic technopolitics. That is to say, how we think about the democratic potential of different, often incompatible, dimensions of technopolitics. Ultimately, what is at stake in this account of the democratic potential of technopolitics is the capacity to engage with the antagonistic conditions that both underpin 'the political' and enliven its radical possibilities.

### **3.5.1 Organised networks.**

One area that does provide such potential is Ned Rossiter's description of 'organised networks' (2004) and the subsequent debates surrounding post-representative forms of politics and democracy (Virno, 2003; Lovink and Rossiter, 2005). Organised networks are described by Rossiter as 'post-representative institutional forms' whose political, economic and communicative capacities are shaped and conditioned by what Terranova (2004) has characterised as the 'nonlinear dynamics of the network system'. Rossiter's account of organised networks draws on Mouffe's critique of traditional, particularly liberal, forms of democracy that are based on rational consensus and upon deliberative modes which exclude multiple rationalities (i.e. they are 'exclusive'). The outline of organised networks he proposes endeavours to bring together the pragmatic and strategic dimensions of democratic political struggle in an 'agonistic' framework.

Rossiter's delineation of organised networks attempts to transpose Mouffe's outline of agonistic democracy on to the online environment. To achieve this, however, he maintains that the direction of agonistic democracy needs to be recast to take account of new modes of politics and sociality in networks. Rossiter's proposition is that organised networks continue to negotiate the antagonisms that are internal to social relations in nonlinear networks. Organised networks constitute post-representational institutions of decision-making that avoid classic models of representation by placing an emphasis on process over its after-effect, 'consensus'. This emphasis on process entails the continual questioning of the network form itself – not for the purpose of transcendence or consensus, but for the purpose of instituting a socio-technical network with the capacity to create the conditions that

sustain a plurality of needs, interests and passions. In other words, the conditions that are constitutive of any political space. Organised networks can thus be said to introduce a new understanding of organisational structures, practices and formations that is attentive to the ways in which politics is situated within the media of communication networks.

While the organised network constitutes an effective framework through which to account for networked modes of politics, one point of departure identified is that of the organised network as an 'institutional' form. My claim is that the premiss of organised networks as 'institutional forms' may actually restrict their radical possibilities. I argue that the institutional refrain runs the risk of reproducing the very thing that the organised network would recast. The application of 'institution' has overtones of *rationality* and *consensus*, which are imbricated in the liberal discourse of politics and democracy that I have suggested is insufficient to account for new networks of politics. Another proposition for the organised network is therefore required.

I propose the model of 'emergent plateaus of organisation' (EPO). I use this expression to capture the 'mutable' architecture that entails the socio-technical characteristics of nonlinear networks. The EPO performs a 'stabilising' role within nonlinear networks. The stabilising power of the EPO enables us to *think* the potential for an 'agonistic' mode of democracy in terms of 'networks of possibility'. This possibility is identified as twofold.

First, the EPO sustains the idea of a 'moment' of network stability. But the important thing is that, because such moments are understood as 'emergent', they are temporal and thus fail to materialise as *absolute* formations. In this way, the EPO remains constantly alert to the fact that difference and antagonism are at once the *conditions of possibility* of constituting stability (organisation) as well as providing its essential limits. The EPO will therefore be more receptive to the multiplicity of voices that the nonlinear socio-technical architecture of networks incites and to the complexity of the power structure that this network of differences entails.

Second, my account of EPO guards against complacency and inevitability by impeding the closure of that organisational space. I use the term 'plateau' as a means to revise the limitations of the institutional refrain. Using the term plateau to

depict the emergent nature of organised networks enables us to do two things. Firstly, it allows us to sustain notions of community and commonality within the 'social life' of the organised network. That is to say, the way in which links, associations and communications between individuals may both broaden the scope/participation of/in the organised network itself as well as form the basis for new political/social relations. And secondly, it calls attention to the *temporality* of this 'communal space' of the organised network and the need to remain attentive to the differences, diffractions and antagonisms that comprise its conditions of possibility.

The EPO brings nonlinear networks, sustainability and the aims of an agonistic mode of democracy together in a way that enables us to define new 'networks of possibility'. The EPO can therefore take many forms, in which the conditions of democratic contestation can both be accommodated and brought to the fore.

### **3.5.2 Peer-to-peer.**

One example of this 'networked' formation can be seen in the proliferation of peer-to-peer (P2P) file sharing. P2P file sharing refers to the process by which digital objects – in particular music, video and text files – can be uploaded on to a computer hardrive and then exchanged or shared using a file sharing program such as Overnet or eDonkey. What P2P file sharing introduces is, in effect, a diffusion of new kinds of relations and practices of transaction and exchange that are organised through multiple and decentred networks. On a file sharing program such as eDonkey (currently the network with the highest number of users according to [Slyck.com](http://Slyck.com)) there is no centralised repository or 'server' that indexes all available files; it merely acts to organise the connectivity of users or 'peers' on the network. Each peer logs on to a network, finds other peers on the network, and communicates with them (hence the phrase peer-to-peer). Files are 'shared' rather than exchanged, in the sense that there is no real requirement to provide additional files in exchange for others (in the way that, say, a material object like a compact disc is quantified through the measurement of capital). At the same time, however, a user of eDonkey is seeking out 'something', in this case a cache of digital information, a music or video file to download, which implies a context of use, some singularity: a 'space' wherein that object is immediately localised at a specific point, on the hardrive of a computer terminal. A point at which, it could also be asserted, the user is 'controlling' the process, both as a subject and a consumer of that digital



object, that music file, and as a distributor of said object to other users or peers on the network. And yet this space of localisation is at no time ever fixed or permanent. Rather, it points towards a diversification and complexification of established relations between producer and consumer, subject and object, and time and space, and in so doing altering our perception of what it means to be a person interacting with other persons. In this sense, a P2P network like eDonkey is better understood as a 'space' or 'plateau' of organisation through which the uneven and nonlinear networks of the Internet can be made meaningful ('localised') to those users who interact within it.

Here we can therefore see how the practise of P2P marks a new articulation of the citizen/consumer, producer/receiver and object/subject categories, redrawing established relations by arranging the individual or subject as a key determinant in the reproduction and dissemination of new kinds of digital objects. This 'space' of communication flows is one in which our subjectivities cannot remain fixed or certain but both engage and are engaged through a hypertextual relationship with other networks. This 'space' is always, therefore, an emergent space, since it is never fully formed. Here the subject is not autonomous or rational in the modern sense, since there is no reference back to some foundational identity. Rather, the subject is characterised by what Martin Lister has referred to as a 'margin of novelties' (Lister et al, 2003) – the way that notions of identity and of subjectivity are, on the Internet, always open to one more relation of 'otherness'. That is to say, they are open *interminably* to a different thinking of time and space, a different thinking of process and event, and thus to other, increasingly heterogeneous temporalities of politics and organisation.

### **3.5.3 Wikis.**

Another example of this mode of thinking is provided by the 'Wiki'. Taken from the Hawaiian word for 'quick', wikis are web applications or 'hypertextual archives' that work on the basis of 'open-editing', meaning that any online user can develop not only the content of the database (add, edit or delete) but also its organisation (the addition of hyperlinks). For example, projects such as Wikipedia ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main\\_Page](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page)), a web-based, free content encyclopaedia, allow articles to be continually developed by numerous authors without any formal review process. Wikipedia lacks an editor-in-chief or a central, top-down mechanism whereby the day-to-day progress on the encyclopaedia is monitored

and approved. Instead, 'active participants' (basically any visitor to the Wikipedia site) make copyedits and corrections to the content and format problems they see. Most policies and guidelines are thus enforced by individual users editing pages, and discussing matters with each other through the Wikipedia mailing list and discussion forums. So the participants are both writers *and* editors.

While some accounts of wikis consider their potential in terms of "social software" that 'networks people around similar interests . . . [contributing to] the strengthening of community and democracy amongst its users' (Khan & Kellner, 2005: 93), I think this approach is too restrictive, since it understands them merely as tools which may, in the right context, be put towards specific 'uses'. These 'contexts' and uses' are, for Khan and Kellner, 'projects of political activism . . . [directed towards] promoting ongoing political struggles . . . and strong democratic practices that break with the logic of capital. . .' (Ibid.). However, this way of thinking about wikis is premised, for the most part, on the extension of political subjects and identities as *they are*, and the possibilities they may afford for new forms of political mobilisation. Khan and Kellner effectively reduce democratic struggle and contestation to a matter simply of participation and the need for people to become 'better informed' if they are to develop 'democratic and oppositional practices' that might break with the logic of capital. Their argument is premised on the 'question of politics' having been decided in advance, and thus that the 'act' of participating and contributing (messages, postings, articles) to, say, Wikipedia, *is* democratic since it initiates a process that breaks with the communicative practices of commercial and corporate media institutions (2005: 93). As a result, the 'problem' of democracy is reduced to a kind of 'technical fix', wherein the need to participate effectively becomes the principal barometer by which politics is thought (Dean, 2005: 57 – 60; 63). In this sense, what is proposed is not the progression of a new politics *as such*, but rather an 'ongoing struggle' to reinforce existing political ties and relationships with the aim of evoking the 'potential for a participatory democracy that can be actualised when publics reclaim and reconstruct technology. . .' (Khan & Kellner, 2005: 84).

Accordingly, their approach does not take into account the potential for new kinds of relations and political bonds inscribed in the 'hypertextuality' of the network itself.

I therefore argue that a more radical way of thinking about the politics of wikis is to consider them as emergent plateaus of organisation. Thought about in this way, wikis raise new questions about the nature and character of new kinds of subjects and their relationship with emergent technics of knowledge/content creation. For

instance, Wikipedia is an archive of dispersed though interconnected links and linkages which do not so much enable control of meaning and content ('reader controlled') but a redirection of meaning. It 'organises' content through a process of 'dissemination'. This process can be likened, in particular, to Jacques Derrida's account of dissemination (1983). For Derrida, dissemination is about the 'division of meaning'. It is a process that is 'constant and often grafts many different meanings into one place . . . and so resists closure' (304). Similarly, each document or article on the Wikipedia project is part of a network, a particle or fragment within and, through links, also part of the network(s) and connections it may proceed to generate. A contributor to Wikipedia may, on the one hand, post an article to the site for others to read. But because that specific content is open to addition and alteration, as well as being hyperlinked with other articles and websites, it suggests a rearticulation of the subject/author/producer from the centre of the text to its margins. This means that each 'contribution' is always open to *another* relation of difference – from the point of meaning or inception to an 'offering', to a point in a sequence of a continuously transforming pattern of meaning. Since every article on Wikipedia can be cited and adapted, it can also break from its 'original' context or meaning and so 'engender infinitely new contexts in an absolutely nonsaturable fashion' (Ibid.:320). In other words, the texts, materials and articles that 'makes up' the Wikipedia archive provide a means of keeping the question of thought 'open'. And this is a profoundly 'political' question, since it opens the possibility for an outline of democracy not as an already imagined ideal (i.e. the 'strengthening of civic participation' that Khan and Kellner talk of) but as a *radically undecidable* – and thus always emergent – horizon of different risks, chances and possibilities.

#### 3.5.4 Organised networks as radical democratic forms.

Thinking about organised networks in this way, as emergent socio-technical forms, is the only way to realise their radical democratic possibilities. The above-outlined dimensions of the organised network comprise their defining characteristics. Rather than the translation of organised networks as institutional forms, the emergent networks that I describe are defined, most of all, through their capacity to address, mediate, and intervene in the complexity of social relations that *any* democratic activity necessary entails. The organised networks' capacity to negotiate the 'conflictual conditions' that underpin the sociality of networks is therefore central to its radical democratic possibilities, since it is the



'accommodation' of conflict and antagonism that is essential if we are to keep questions of politics and democracy open. Understood in this way, the designate emergent plateau of organisation can be said to necessitate the *futurity* of the organised network – deferring the organised networks' *absolute realisation* by keeping open its element of possibility.

The new kinds of politics and subjectivities taking shape today actually challenge the very context within which they can be either marginalised or assimilated, either 'mainstream' or else 'alternative'. Both the examples of P2P and wikis suggest socio-technical systems that cannot be straightforwardly explained according to an outline of 'alternative' or 'oppositional'. For instance, P2P may be viewed, on the one hand, as an 'alternative' to the prevailing relations of the production, circulation and consumption of cultural artefacts (such as music). In which case P2P networks may suggest an 'alternative principle of symbolic economy', whereby the Internet 'subverts the logic of commodification and helps generate the model of an [alternative] economy . . . outside of the commodity culture of capitalism' (Khan and Kellner, 2005: 87). And yet, by that same token, it is not really alternative at all – and certainly not in the context of the above description. P2P technology is not definable simply in relation to what it is not, i.e. mainstream, corporate, commercial, legitimate, etc (primarily because peer-to-peer *can* be all of these things<sup>5</sup>).

Moreover, neither is it very effective to work with a simple opposition of alternative to dominant, whereupon the latter means corporate or institutional interests (capital) and the former means something like resistant cultures or a 'politics of opposition'. Nor is it particularly useful to think up ways in which the perceived hegemony of the latter can be modified or transformed through the former (as is the problem, for instance, with Hardt and Negri's 'multitude'). In fact, in the case of P2P, the corporate environment is actually playing 'catch-up', trying to 'dissuade' the millions of users away from free file sharing systems to paid-for 'legitimate' download sites.<sup>6</sup>

This brings to the fore one of the distinctive features of the globalisation-ICT-networks triumvirate: that is, while the concentration of power and wealth may be increasingly distinct from local contexts, our collective forms of meaning are more readily to hand. While technologies like the Internet may, on the one hand, reinforce relations of cultural capital, hierarchy and distinction, opening out what has been tellingly termed a 'global digital-divide' (Norris, 2002; Warschauer, 2003), they also hold out the potential to contribute to the formation of a genuinely dispersed 'network culture'. Not only does this network culture extend new

conditions and relations of communication and interaction between communicating individuals, but it also makes possible new processes of connectivity and organisation between distant publics: from the spread of list cultures and interactive communication forums such as Fibreculture and the Interactivist Network, to the spread of P2P file sharing and the development of 'hypertextual archives' or wikis. These emergent socio-technical forms of organisation are mediated by a logic of networks 'as they operate' – that is, as uneven, heterogeneous passages and combinations of communication. They therefore provide a mutable formation in which organisation, negotiation and action (*thinking, deciding and acting*) is temporarily arrested within a continuum of difference and translation. These 'plateaus of organisation', as I identify them, emerge as new *forms* of democratic possibility, ones whose political capacities are at once made possible and defined by new combinations of networks. Thus, in order to think democracy within networks, it is necessary to develop in conceptual and practical ways languages for these 'post-representational' democratic forms (Virno, 2003).

While I think that these 'networks of possibility' can be considered as institutional forms insofar as they have a capacity to organise social relations, as Rossiter claims, they are radically dissimilar to the technics of modern institutional forms such as parliament and auxiliary institutions and departments. In other words, I do not think it is possible to speak of democracy as a representative, consensus based politics in the environment of ICTs and networks. As such, the institutional refrain, particularly as it is advocated in the work of Rossiter, also requires rethinking. Post-representational forms of democratic organisation necessitate a new mode of thinking that is capable of 'thinking beyond' the institutional refrain. This is required because the capacity to think politics and democracy in new – potentially illimitable – ways cannot be limited to a narrow conception of how and in what ways 'democracy' is organised.

A better place to look for a vision of futural radical democratic forms is therefore at organisations, movements and practices such as those profiled in the case study sections of this thesis – the Indymedia, Interactivist and Fibreculture networks, P2P technology and tactical activism, and the movements against corporate globalisation. In these examples we see an emerging 'techno-political' terrain where ICTs are at once central and 'the norm'. In fact, email listserves, websites, digital archives, databases and social/sharing networks are so deeply ingrained in the DNA of these modes of organisation that they are, strictly speaking, no less

'ordinary' than the media of newspapers, telephones and television, or indeed letters, pamphlets, placards and walls. The movement, mutability, plurality and nonlinearity of these modes of organisation provide the very 'conflictual conditions' – the 'essence of the political', as Mouffe suggests (2005: 8 – 9) – from which important things are surfacing: coalitions, campaigns, networks, tactics and concepts. Moreover, with these things come new modes of organisation and ways of thinking and acting that are changing the terrain of democratic struggle. As this terrain starts to come in to focus we see new articulations of the future.

### **3.6 CONCLUSION.**

In viewing the new kinds of political subjectivities and practices that emerge from the nexus of ICTs and networks, I argue that they suggest 'other' visions and ideas of democratic organisation that may undermine and disrupt the patterns of domination, exploitation and exclusion embedded in the current forms of neoliberal globalisation. Through their 'lack' of overall unifying perspective, their diffusion of points of transmission and organisation, and their indubitably 'imperfect' arrangement, these emergent cultures of politics can therefore be said to challenge attempts to divert their disorderly patterns into traditional political binaries and oppositions. That is not to say that the 'alternative' and 'oppositional' categories do not continue to serve as important markers in the delineation of emergent political forms. The continued discussion of a nascent 'technopolitics' has given rise to important areas of research concerning the manifold ways in which ICTs have been employed in/for political struggle. Many interesting and innovative theses concerning the uses of the ICTs have been explained and explored, from Michael Hardt's 'networks of unity' (2002) and Khan and Kellner's 'oppositional technopolitics' (2004, 2005) to theories of 'netwar' and emergent modes of class politics for the information age (Wark, 2004), as well as the numerous modes of political activism associated with the anti-capitalist/corporate movements (Klein, 2002; Diani and McAdam, 2003; Mertes, 2004). However, if one restricts their thinking of the ICTs merely to tools that may (or may not) strengthen notions of community and democracy amongst their users, we risk closing off important areas of political inquiry. Moreover, by considering democracy primarily in terms of participation, and the restriction or expansion of existing divisions and oppositions that make 'democratic contributions', one will not even be able to broach the question of the contribution of the ICTs to new understandings of, and ways of thinking about, politics and democracy. For it is precisely through an examination



of the role of the ICTs in shaping new kinds of political subjects and relations that questions of politics and democracy can be kept 'open'. And it is this sense of the futurity of democracy, of the need to 'rethink', 're-elaborate' and 're-examine' the 'practices of democracy . . . so as to ward off its dissolution' (Butler, 2000: 268 – 9), which clearly carries forward the best ethico-political traditions of radical democratic theory.

Throughout the opening chapters of this thesis I have therefore illustrated some of the ways in which the specific contexts of the ICTs enable new modes of politics and organisation, and how these may hold open the possibility of generating new theories of radical democracy more appropriate to an increasingly networked society. I have demonstrated how the emergence of new kinds of politics entails *precisely* a questioning of our understanding of democracy, thereby allowing us keep that category 'open' by suffusing it with new meanings and interpretations. As Laclau and Mouffe remind us, there should be no regions which the practice of radical democratic politics should exclude *a priori* as possible spheres of struggle (1985: 192). Taking up this challenge, the *form* of emergent political cultures that I want to discuss in the subsequent chapters each give emphasis to the crucial role of the ICTs in shaping a 'radical democratic response' to the complex challenges of globalisation, informationisation and neoliberal capitalism, and to our understanding of social change. I relate these new cultures of politics to explorations of tactical media networks, peer-to-peer technology and dynamics of open publishing and list cultures, which I suggest can in turn be linked to a more radical questioning within political and cultural theory about the relationship between the ICTs and the conditions of new kinds of democratic forms of politics. By examining these cultures of politics in terms of their radical democratic potential, it will be possible to open out a double analysis that would indicate how the manifold conditions emerging within and through a 'networked culture' are subject to competing forces and interests and at the same time analyse how this nonlinear network dynamic affords potentials for new forms of democratic power from below.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, in the run up to the 2005 UK general election the Labour Party secured the services of Zack Exley, the man responsible for the anti-George Bush/Republican website Moveon.org ('No. 10 in new dirty tricks row over role of US 'Garbage Man'. *The Independent*, February 27 2005).

<sup>2</sup> For example, in an interview cultural critic Mark Dery describes CAE as a 'philosophical terrorist cell' and makes comparisons to the Italian Group the Red Brigades, to which Antonio Negri once belonged (Dery, 1999). And RTMark, the activist support network, is often congratulated for its brand of 'media terrorism' – "attack without physical injury" as their website puts it ([www.rtmark.com/projectlist.html](http://www.rtmark.com/projectlist.html)).

<sup>3</sup> In true hacker style the text of Wark's *Hacker Manifesto* has been revised and re-written a number of times, and has appeared in different forms on various listserves and webzines in recent years. The version that I use is version 4.0, and all subsequent references are to this copy. Version 4.0 can be accessed at: [http://subsol.c3.hu/subsol\\_2/contributors0/warktext.html](http://subsol.c3.hu/subsol_2/contributors0/warktext.html)

<sup>4</sup> That is not to say that Wark is in complete agreement with Hardt and Negri about the characteristics of this universal agent, where its interests are best served or the nature of the struggle it is engaged in. In a recent interview with Adriana Amaral posted to the *Beavergroup* forum Wark sets out some key differences between himself and Hardt and Negri: "Hardt and Negri are very useful because they are optimists about social change, because they think history from the bottom up, as made by people, and because they think historically and systematically. Where I depart from them is that I think that capitalism is giving way to a whole new kind of commodity economy. I think there is a whole new class struggle, between hackers, who create new information, and what I call a vectoralist class, who monopolise the means of realizing its value. In America, we see the big corporations being hollowed out. Production is exiled to the 'developing' world, while head office maintains control of the patents, trademarks and brands. I think that the term 'multitude' that Hardt and Negri use obscures this new dimension of class conflict, and misses the key changes in the form of property through which the commodity economy is expanding into a new phase. What is significant about this attempt to transform information into private property is that it can fail. As I say in *A Hacker Manifesto*: "information wants to be free but is everywhere in chains." Information can escape from scarcity. It can only be squeezed into the private property form with an intense amount of legal coercion. So perhaps the moment finally arrives when a "political narrative" for "postmodern society" can make sense". Last accessed on 24/05/2005 at: <http://www.16beavergroup.org/monday/archives/001524.php>

<sup>5</sup> For one example, see: 'iMesh Strikes a Deal with the RIAA', *Slyck News*, July 20, 2004: <http://www.slyck.com/news.php?story=529>.

<sup>6</sup> And 'catch-up' it really is. Indeed a recent article on the Slyck News website provides a break-down of the statistics from P2P networks which suggest that file sharing is actually on the increase, with an estimated 10 million users of the five main P2P networks, eDonkey2000, DirectConnect, FastTrack, Gnutella and Overnet. See, 'Interest in file sharing at an all time high', *Slyck News*, April 27, 2005: <http://www.slyck.com/news.php?story=763>.

**CHAPTER 4.****TACTICAL MEDIA AS A RADICAL DEMOCRATIC PRACTICE.**

This chapter is concerned with an elaboration of tactical media networks from the point of view of their radical democratic potential. Here I will be returning to some of the issues raised towards the end of chapter three, about the requirement to think politics and democracy in line with new social, cultural and technological conditions, and considering how a tactical media approach may contribute to other ways of conceiving democracy, politics and the political more appropriate to the present time. What I attempt to do here is, in effect, to show how some of the ideas of tactical media hold open the potential for developing new radical democratic cultures of politics.

The primary activities of tactical media – subversion, disobedience, opposition and resistance – have in many ways shaped the emergence and values of groups like Adbusters and CAE, as well as the practices of electronic civil disobedience (ECD). Although diverse in their ‘tactical’ methodologies, what all three examples can be said to put forward is a different way of theorising the ‘politics of tactical media’. However, I want to suggest that while the tactics of subversion and disobedience have played a crucial role in contributing to the formation of radical media cultures and new social relations, they do not, in and of themselves, provide us with an adequate understanding of the democratic potentials of tactical media. In response to this charge, I argue that what is required is a rethinking of the activities of tactical media in order to broach the question of their ‘politicality’ – that is, the capacity of such tactics as subversion and disobedience to both create and sustain the conditions required for democratic forms of organisation. This question of politicality is significant because one of the frequently cited criticisms of tactical media concerns its proclivity for the ‘politics of spectacle’ and the prominence it gives to the pragmatic over and above sustainability. Or, as Ned Rossiter has put it:

Tactical media are about rapidly organised, at times even spontaneous, short-term ‘hit-and-run’ interventions . . . [But] tactical media have, for the most part, been unable to address the problem of sustainability . . . to have a purchase beyond the safe-haven of the activist ghetto (Rossiter, 2004).



I argue that the challenge both of developing and sustaining new cultures of radical politics as democratic forms of organisation can be met through an interface with the ideas advanced in respect of radical democracy. Retaining the 'agonistic' notion of radical democracy, outlined in my second and third chapters, is crucial to my argument. However, if this agonistic framework is to affect new forms of democratic organisation it needs to be recast in order to take account of new modes of sociality and politics as they are organised in networks.

Similar to Laclau and Mouffe's proposal for an agonistic model of radical democracy, I argue that new forms of democratic organisation are dependent on their continual capacity to negotiate the ineradicability of antagonisms. But their difference lies in the affirmation of values that are internal to the formation of new socialities and new technics of 'networked' relations. New 'spaces' or networks of connection and organisation must, I suggest, go beyond the binary logic of resistance and opposition that is often the primary activity of tactical media activism. New forms of democratic organisation must enable us to think both in terms of the potential for new 'alliances' (between activists, hackers, journalists, critics, academics, etc.) through which 'other' types of actions and activities may be elaborated, while at the same time retaining a mobility that remains attentive to the more spontaneous, uneven and contradictory characteristics associated with ICTs and networks. What is at stake in these new spaces of democratic organisation is the ethico-political potential of tactical activism to engage with the antagonistic foundations of 'the political'. I therefore hope to illustrate some of the ways in which 'radical democratic spaces' emerge out of the tension between tactical activists who seek to define those spaces in various ways, and an irreducible responsibility to the 'other', which concerns the deferral of the 'fulfilment' of any such 'space' as the *very condition* through which new interests, ideas and relations make *the democratic* possible.

#### 4.1 WHAT IS TACTICAL MEDIA?

As a starting point to this analysis I want to provide a brief account of tactical media. Here I will focus upon what I think are the most salient elements from a range of discussions about tactical media. This will serve both as a background to the specific examples of tactical media that I want to focus on in this chapter as well as helping to contextualise the above arguments.

David Garcia and Geert Lovink's *ABC of Tactical Media* (1997) is a foundational essay in the development of the theory of tactical media. In this essay the authors argue that individuals and groups should respond to the proliferation of new media and communication technologies by learning to use them 'tactically'. From activists and programmers to ordinary – 'everyday' – users, we need to become proficient 'media tacticians' capable of 'finding creative and innovative ways of using the products used by the dominant information-based order'. In an increasingly mediatised world, where what comprises much of our culture are ICTs, Garcia and Lovink advocate a 'do-it-yourself' manifesto of media practice and theory. They explain it in this way:

[Tactical media] are what happens when the cheap do-it-yourself media, made possible by the revolution in consumer electronics and expanded forms of distribution (from public access cable to the Internet), are exploited by groups and individuals who feel aggrieved by, or excluded from, the wider culture . . . Tactical media do not just report events; as they are never impartial, they always participate and it is this more than anything that separates them from the mainstream media (Garcia and Lovink, 1997).

As a distinct category, tactical media was first identified and theorised in Amsterdam during the first half of the 1990s (Lovink, 2002). According to Garcia and Lovink, it was part of the process of formulating a rhetorical narrative for a festival that would stand in polemical opposition to the glittering hardware spectacles that constituted the media and arts festivals of the time. The first Next Five Minutes (N5M) convention on tactical media can be seen against this backdrop.<sup>1</sup> The thinking behind this conference was connected to both local and international conditions of the period. On the one hand, tactical media served as a badge of convenience, linking a diverse collection of western European and northern American media artists, activists and hackers. On the other, their equivalent from the former communist countries of central and eastern Europe, dissident artists and samizdat activists (evoking the soviet era of underground writing and publishing), still basking in the euphoria which accompanied the then recent collapse of the Soviet Union and the communist dictatorships.

In the US and western Europe, tactical media, both then and now, are overwhelmingly the media of campaigns rather than of broadly-based social movements, and tend to be rooted in local initiatives with their own agendas and

vocabularies. This is the case, for instance, in the works of tactical activists like Adbusters and their peculiarly anti-consumerist practice of 'subvertising' – basically, disrupting and defacing the smooth flow of consumerist practices by generating new ways to explore and challenge the wealth of advertising as an 'inert practice' or a one-way-flow ([www.adbusters.org](http://www.adbusters.org)). In contrast, media tacticians of the (former) central and eastern bloc countries had been very much part of a vast historical uprising. As such, their samizdat approach to media activism took the form of anti-state radio stations such as B92 in Belgrade, or initiatives like the Zamir computer network, which provided email contact between cities like Pristina, Belgrade and Zagreb during the disruptive period of 1992 – 95. This contrast between west and east is notable in approach: while those in the former eastern bloc countries sought to generate an independent media that wasn't under the control of the state, in the west tactical media referred primarily to the subversion and disruption of the mainstream media's consumer-oriented production.

The large-scale encounter between these two distinctive cultural communities can be marked out as an initiating point from which the first N5M gathering sought to develop a new kind of politics: one that traversed the polarised political thinking of the cold war period to explore and experiment with new forms of media and technology as a potential for generating new cultures of political and social activism. Though ideological differences existed (unsurprisingly, given that a meeting of capitalist and communist custom pointed towards different understandings and perceptions of the 'struggles' and 'lived experiences' in those respective societies <sup>2</sup>) the nucleus of the myriad dialogues of this primordial conference centred around the shared practice of engaging the 'tactical' possibilities of consumer electronics as a means of organisation and social mobilisation.

The fusion of tacticality and technology can be seen as taking its intellectual cue from Michel de Certeau's book *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984). In this work de Certeau analysed the ways in which people 'make use' of the products and practices of commodity consumption. However, his principle concern was not so much a study of consumer behaviour, but a study of how individuals create and appropriate meanings into their everyday life. In relation to television, for instance, de Certeau wrote that:

. . . once the images broadcast by television and the time spent in front of the TV set have been analysed, it remains to be asked what the consumer



*makes* of these images . . . The thousands of people who buy a health magazine, the customers in a supermarket, the practitioners of urban space, the consumers of newspaper stories and legends – what do they make of what they ‘absorb’, receive and pay for? What do they do with it? (de Certeau, 1984: 31).

In response to these questions, de Certeau argued that everyday practices – such as watching television or reading a newspaper – should not be concealed ‘as merely the obscure background of social activity’, but it is necessary to ‘penetrate this obscurity’ and to ‘articulate’ everyday life. These practices do not directly concern ‘individuality’ or ‘the subjects’, but rather ‘modes of operation or schemata of action’. He described the practice of consumption as a set of tactics by which the weak make use of the strong. He characterised the ‘rebellious user’ (as opposed to consumer) as tactical and the ‘presumptuous producer’ (which included authors, educators and revolutionaries) as strategic. de Certeau stated that the purpose of everyday practice was to ‘make explicit the *strategic* product-system’ by bringing to light the ‘models of action characteristic of [rebellious] users’ as opposed to ‘consumers.’ (de Certeau, 1994: 474-5). This ‘tactical’ practice of consumption is, he argued, ‘devious, dispersed and insinuates itself everywhere’, and does not ‘manifest itself through the dominant product-system but rather through its ways of using the products to provoke a new spectacle’ (Ibid.: 475).

Garcia and Lovink draw inspiration from de Certeau’s emphasis on the ‘uses’ of media, rather than ‘the media’ in its own right. However, whereas de Certeau saw the purpose of this ‘tactics of practice’ as constituting a ‘therapeutics for deteriorating social relations’ (1984: xxiv), they envision a more radical objective. Rather than having as its goal a form of ‘therapeutics’, they argue that ‘being tactical’ should comprise the formation of a ‘new politics for the construction of a new everyday life’. Garcia and Lovink’s emphasis on tactics as ‘practice’ and ‘spectacle’ can, in many ways, be said to build on the Situationist idea of ‘detournement’. The Situationists came to prominence in the late 1960’s with their brand of ‘aesthetic activism’, focusing primarily on the commercialised media spectacle of representation and the cultural space of advertising. They used the idea of ‘detournement’ to characterise their particular style of activism: taking over the image and words from the mass spectacle, but putting them through an unexpected ‘detour’, using them in a way they were not originally intended by combining them in surprising combinations and juxtapositions (Plant, 1992: 3). For

example, the Situationists altered the soundtracks of 1960's karate and porn films to reflect the struggle against bureaucracy, turning the dialogue into parodies of establishment politicians. Their activism also influenced more traditional political struggles, such as the striking French workers of May 1968, who appropriated the media image of James Bond with a gun for a poster announcing themselves – in a Marxian vista – as the new spectre haunting the world.<sup>3</sup> These 'spectacles' of cultural subversion were neither art nor political speech in the conventional sense. Rather, their disruptive power was that they did not use the familiar, straightforward language of politics.

## 4.2 TACTICAL MEDIA IN ACTION 1: TACTICS AS SUBVERSION.

The practice of cultural subversion is another way of exploring the practices of a tactical media approach. 'Culture jamming' is the term that is often used to describe contemporary ideas of cultural subversion. The term itself is generally credited to the San Francisco audio-college band Negativland, though it has its roots much earlier than this. Culture jamming owes a great deal to Guy Debord and the Situationists (and the Paris uprisings of May 1968), and to the power of a simple 'detournement'. Perhaps the most recognised proponents of culture jamming are the Adbusters group, who take Debord's statement that 'plagiarism is necessary. Progress depends on it. It sticks close to an author's phrasing, exploits his expressions, deletes a false idea, replaces it with the right one' (Debord, [1967] 1995: 207) to a new level of proficiency and action. And it is to them that I would like to turn next as a way of illustrating the 'tactics' of cultural subversion.

### 4.2.1 Culture jamming.

In its present day context culture jamming can be used to describe a range of practices: from the parodying and subversion of advertising billboards by groups like the Billboard Liberation Front ([www.billboardliberation.com/](http://www.billboardliberation.com/)), to the lifting of website designs or the copying of design elements of popular websites or brands in order to use them for alternative purposes, such as is supported by activist funding groups like RtMark ([www.rtmark.com/](http://www.rtmark.com/)). On the welcome page of the Adbusters website ([www.adbusters.org](http://www.adbusters.org)), for example, was for a time a situationist slogan – 'live without dead time', one of the most frequently sighted graffiti of May 1968, and which refers to the tension between the idea of 'dead time' as consumption and the productive effects of chaos or *detournement* as an affirmative experience.

Contesting advertising and consumer practices with their own weapons is central to any attempt at undermining what the Situationists called the *spectacle*: the integrated, commercialised cultural space in which 'everything that was directly lived has moved away into representation' (Debord, [1967] 1995). Culture jamming can be said to act on what the situationists theorised, emphasising the centrality of advertising, consumption and media more generally to the spectacle. Depicted variously as an 'engaged politics in an empire of signs' and an 'aesthetic of confusion', culture jamming can perhaps be most lucidly understood as a practice of media and cultural activism which draws attention to issues and problems with those same things. I think the following citations bear this out. Graham Meikle's book *Media Activism* suggests that the purpose of culture jamming is to turn the 'familiar into a question mark'. . . [it] is a way to get this 'dysfunctional culture to bite its own tail' (Meikle, 2002: 132). And according to the anti-capitalist Notes from Nowhere ensemble, culture jamming represents an 'assault on advertising and consumer culture involving the deliberate disruption, distortion or subversion of mainstream media messages' (Notes from Nowhere, ed. 2003: 244).

Culture jamming baldly rejects the notion that marketing – because it buys its way into public spaces – must be passively accepted as a one-way flow of information. Thus, the onus is placed on the activist or 'jammer' to challenge the established meaning or identity of a brand by, for instance, hijacking an advertisement and opening it up to alternative accounts. One of the most popular and visually distinct ways has been through the juxtaposition of first world icons with third world scenes: an Indonesian child wearing Nike trainers; Dynasty playing on a TV set in an African hut; Asian students rioting in front of McDonalds' golden arches, are all images that have been used (see Klein, 2000: 279 – 309). By drawing attention both to the original context of the sign (or brand) and its constructedness, a new relationship is potentially exposed, one that brings into direct confrontation two distinct structures of thought. Or, as Debord and Wolman once suggested: 'the mutual interference of two worlds of feeling, or the bringing together of two independent expressions' (Debord and Wolman, 1981: 9). This frictional force makes the most complex systems vulnerable to the effects of 'random variation': literally anything can be used. This is effectively illustrated by the Notes From Nowhere grouping:

1. The voice boxes of hundreds of G.I Joes and Barbies are switched and the dolls replaced on store shelves. On opening their purchases, consumers find



their new Barbie huskily intoning “dead men tell no lies”, while a muscular, camouflaged G.I Joe shrieks “want to go shopping?” Inside the boxes, a leaflet calls on the buyer to contact the local media and is signed by the Barbie Liberation Front. A popular story with the media; Mattel, the dolls’ manufacturers, was less than happy.

2. A few years ago sportswear manufacturer Nike launched their ‘express yourself’ campaign, allowing any consumer the chance to have a message of their choice embroidered on their new trainers. When a prospective customer inquired whether he could have the word ‘sweatshop’ embroidered on his new shoes, Nike refused. The resulting dialogue between Nike and the culture jammer is forwarded via email around the world, making national news bulletins and gaining column inches in the press.<sup>4</sup>

These cases can, I think, be seen as fairly conventional examples of culture jamming. What they are concerned with is the actual practice of challenging, countering, or critiquing popular culture by co-opting its images, language, and methods. They do this by seeking to expose questionable political assumptions behind commercial culture so that people can momentarily consider the branded environment in which they live. Some of these communiqués create a sense of transparency about a product or company by the social experiences of workers that are left out of the advertising fantasies (such as Nike). Apart from the ‘spectacle’ of the subversion and the initial amusement at the sheer audacity of the jam itself, there is also an important underlying theme to the above instances: crucial to both jams is a connection with the broader economic system, bringing into the same sphere the notion of brands for the global market with the financial forces driving their ever-cheaper production. While both Mattel and Nike extend their brand iconography around the world, manufacturing toys for the latest Hollywood movie tie-in or endorsing the highest profile sporting celebrities as role models, this is starkly juxtaposed with those producing the artefacts that physically embody the brands themselves – the toys and trainers being manufactured by workers from as far afield as Indonesia and Haiti to Turkey, China and even the USA itself, often in repressive, dangerous and illegal conditions, without access to union representation or basic workers rights. Accordingly, the word ‘sweatshop’ – which dates back to the nineteenth century – has been reintroduced into popular lexicon. Today the term is not only a common point of reference for anti-sweatshop campaigns against the vast Nike and Gap corporations, but also for the mainstream media as well,

where labour exploitation and treatment has on occasion become headline news (though sadly often in tragically newsworthy circumstances, such as the death of 21 Chinese cockle pickers in Morecombe Bay in 2003).

#### **4.2.2 The problem of 'subversion' as a tactic.**

The tactical activities practised by groups like Adbusters suggest, I think, another way of thinking about politics more appropriate to the contemporary situation of intrusive commercialisation and media saturation (Lasn, 2001). In a movement away from conventional forms of left (typically Marxian) thinking on the role of the media in advanced capitalist societies (McChesney & Nichols, 2002; Chomsky, 2002) their tactical approach envisions both a dysfunctional culture that is arranged predominantly according to corporate logics, alongside the assertion that concentrated ownership and control of the means of production is not the same as control of the production of meaning or action. This pull between resistance and incorporation, control and freedom, commercial and anti-commercial, and private and public space are contradictions that, as Adbusters' Kalle Lasn notes, are inherent in our information age (Lasn, 1999).

There are, however, a number of questions that I would like to raise in relation to Adbusters' 'subversive' approach to tactical media. One criticism that can be levelled at Adbusters is the one-way political dialogue. Imitating the methods of the advertising industry, much of it is only concerned with propaganda. 'Culture jammers don't care too much about meaningful political dialogue', argues Adbusters' Lasn. 'We are trying to wake people up, we are trying to get our way onto the television and some of the biggest mass mediums of our time and put our subvertisements and our anti-messages and our 'jams' up there' (Lasn, 2000: 145 – 7). But this kind of 'subvertising', subverting advertisements with the idea that it is a pedagogical exercise that helps people become 'aware' of advertising, that it enables them to become 'media literate', rests upon the assumption that critical thinking *precedes* political action. That is to say, the spectacle of the 'jam' presupposes that the questions of politics has been settled in advance – that the Adbusters 'brand' of activism *is* 'right', 'progressive' and 'alternative'. This then allows two, seemingly commonsensical, assertions to be made. In the instance of the 'jam', when even the mainstream media is overwhelmed and its filtering system is momentarily 'subverted', the claim can be made by activists that their actions represent an 'authentic' justice: "This is what democracy looks like". At the same

time, another claim can be put forward: that the actually existing institutions – the institutions of the globalised media-product-system – are betraying society's trust. As Lasn goes on to say: 'Someone *has* gotten into our brains. Now the most important task on the agenda is to evict them and to and recover our sanity' (Ibid.: 5). But when it is presented as driven primarily by 'common sense', by the need to 'recover' what the institutions of capital have 'stolen', the practice of culture jamming is deprived of its political dimension (its 'negative essence', as Laclau and Mouffe would say) and its veracity appears as self-evident.

This can, in turn, be related to a second criticism that I want to make of Adbusters methodology. While they appropriate the Situationists' view of capitalist society as a 'spectacle', Adbusters run the risk of providing another 'modish' spectacle for people to consume – the 'jam' itself. This paradox is in fact inherent in much of the Adbusters methodology. For example, one issue of the Adbusters magazine featured a fashion layout, for which the magazine thanked such retailers as Banana Republic for providing clothes. Another issue, however, mocked The Gap, Banana Republic's sister corporation, on its the back cover. Adbusters is even involved in the manufacture of training shoes. It began selling the 'Black Spot' trainer in 2004. The retro black canvas shoe's logo is, as the name suggests, a black spot, mimicking the popular Converse All-Star trainer's red star (<http://adbusters.org/metaspots/corpo/blackspotsneaker/>). A similar point is raised by Canadian authors Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter in their book *Nation of Rebels: Why Counterculture Became Consumer Culture* (UK, 2005). Here they criticise culture jamming as not only ineffective, but encouraging the very consumerism it seeks to quell. In a wider critique of the underlying theory of counterculture, Heath and Potter note that the capitalist system thrives not on conformity – as so many 'culture jammers' believe – but rather on individualism and a quest for distinction. Culture jamming cannot bring down 'the system', they contend, because 'the system' doesn't care if you do things differently from others, and, in fact, is more than happy to accommodate you by selling you 'non-conformist' goods. In addition, I would argue that the 'spectacle' of the 'culture jam' itself obfuscates another contradiction: that by mirroring the language and form of the media they seek to subvert there is a danger that one misses precisely what it is that renders this 'spectacle' possible at all – i.e. the failure of any 'system' to tie down meaning to one thing, one interpretation.



In response to the above claims, I argue that what is required is a more robust understanding of the 'politicality' of culture jamming. In particular, I suggest that it is not the 'spectacle' of the culture jam itself which should be considered 'political' (as more conventional proponents like Adbusters would argue), but rather the way in which this 'spectacle' potentially opens up other way of thinking about and understanding different forms of media and cultural production. In other words, the 'spectacle' of the 'culture jam' is not in opposition to the 'spectacle' of consumption; rather, it should be seen as the consequence of the negativity or failure of *any* 'spectacle' to fully constitute itself – the 'culture jam' merely provides an aberration in the arrangement of cultural meaning (whether in the form of an advertisement, a material commodity or a social space), thereby allowing us to see in another way what that meaning *could be*.

#### **4.2.3 The potential of 'subversion' as a tactic.**

Bearing this in mind, I want to outline how we might begin to think about the practice of culture jamming in terms of its 'radical democratic potential'. What I want to argue here is that what renders culture jamming a 'radical democratic practice' is not, in fact, its inflation to a 'marker' of democratic politics *in action*, but rather its emergence as an *interruption* or *breakdown* in the process of signification. To bear this claim out I want to refer briefly to Laclau's claim in *The Making of Political Identities* (1994), and developed subsequently in *Emancipation(s)* (1996) and *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* (2000), that the 'politicisation' of a particular content or subject is dependent on its essentially incomplete character (Laclau, 1994: 4). Laclau's account of politicisation dovetails with his outline of radical democracy, introduced in my second chapter, as being contingent on the multiplication of political subjects. Laclau shows us that it is precisely because meaning cannot be fully attributed to a particular content or political subject that meaning can itself remain open to other interpretations which can themselves be contested. This is the cornerstone of radical democracy – that new political subjects emerge continuously precisely because they are incapable of fulfilling democracy *absolutely* in their own cast. This way of thinking about politics enables us to keep the question of the political open by continually suffusing that category with different meanings. Laclau therefore demonstrates how the political field can be reduced neither to essentialist determinacy nor to a complete 'postmodern' dispersal of representations; neither, in other words, to absolute universality nor

absolute particularity. Both are reductionist paradigms that deny a properly political – i.e. differential – domain.

Although Laclau makes this claim in relation to the constitution of political subjects, his account of politics in these terms can in fact be recast to take account of the way in which the practice of culture jamming is 'politicised' precisely through its failure to secure the process of cultural meaning. Laclau's account of the political is useful in showing how the practice of culture jamming can provide a means to keep the question of politics open. However, this can only be achieved by questioning the somewhat polarising tactics of culture jamming proponents such as Adbusters – i.e. mainstream/alternative, consumerism/anti-consumerism. The culture jammer's tactics in producing 'subvertisements' that attack capitalism, and in anti-media campaigning generally, are those of 'guerrilla skirmishing' in the space of signification, which as singular 'acts' are unlikely to bring about the 'recovery of our sanity' from the realms of postmodern culture and consumerism that Lasn perceives have taken place (Lasn, 2000). The Adbusters understanding of culture jamming primarily as 'resistance' therefore contributes to its limitations. This framework is based, for the most part, on rhetoric of appropriation: it plausibly describes the tactical activism of culture jamming that appropriates the symbolic meanings that are attached to cultural commodities for a 'resistant' use. At the heart of this logic of 'resistance', then, lies a problematic, binary logic of domination and dissent that elevates the 'act' activism while at the same time presenting a monolithic picture of the power structures of capital. In this sense, it is reductionist, since it condenses its arguments to comprise only those which can be presented in oppositional terms – resistance and incorporation, control and freedom, private and public space – and subsequently avoids having to engage with the contradictions between those categories. In other words, like capitalism itself, it denies its 'politicality' by presenting its influence and actions as commonsense and therefore 'right'.

To interrupt this logic of binarism that sustains the Adbusters approach to culture jamming what is required is, therefore, a more radical understanding of how we conceive 'the political'. We need to see culture jamming as *intervention* in the process of cultural signification if we are to understand its political dimension. Culture jamming should be understood as introducing into the domain of cultural representation both an interruption in the level of signification and a starting point

for an investigation of new modes of cultural meaning and representation. I understand this mode of *intervention* as performing a double function.

First, it allows us to consider the purely pragmatic moment or 'spectacle' of culture jamming (such as the act of 'subverting' a particular mode of consumption by making contrary claims: expensive trainers cost a fraction to produce, or franchised fast-food makes us sick, as Morgan Spurlock demonstrated in the docu-film 'Super Size Me') on its own terms, as a disruption in the synchrony of cultural representations as they have been sublimated in the editorial, directional and production process. This 'spectacle' is necessary in that allows us to see the way in which 'dominant' cultural representations and practices have no more claim to authenticity or legitimacy than the culture jam itself. In other words, the 'culture jam' counts as culture just as much as do the practices/texts being produced and consumed.

Second, because the culture jam is viewed as an *intervention* in the process of cultural signification – rather than as an illumination of a particular practice's pre-given meaning and its perceived 'wrongness' or 'deceit' – this helps to subvert the way we think about the production of meaning itself. That is to say, it enables us to think beyond a logic of binarism that constructs two distinct, though paradoxically analogous, 'spectacles': either the 'spectacle' of capital or else the 'spectacle' of anti-capital – the 'culture jam'. By thinking about culture jamming as an *intervention* in the process of signification, not simply as an 'alternative' or 'resistant' meaning, a more radical alterity therefore emerges. This *intervention* emerges as a 'radical decentring' in the discursive act of making meaning *mean*. For example, a cultural object such as an advertisement is not unified either in the logical coherence of its meaning or in the unity of its reception; it is 'made to mean', and that meaning is structured through such ideological means as desire, aspiration and necessity which presume to interpellate us in a specific way – as consumers of that meaning. An advertisement merely constitutes an attempt to domesticate the field of discursivity, to arrest the flow of potential differences, and thus to construct a 'centre' upon which a particular meaning can be perceived as the most logical. By viewing culture jamming as a disturbance of this process, as a subversion of the claim to a centre in which meaning and reception appear in synchronicity, it is possible to show how the transition from 'meaning' to 'reception' is never complete but merely constitutes a partial effort to limit the differentiability of meaning. Because an advertisement *needs* to be made to mean, this suggests that it doesn't actually



represent anything other than its own failed attempt (powerful though it may be) to fully symbolize the field of difference. In this way, Culture jamming can be said to *intervene* in the field of cultural representation not as a disclosure of 'truth' – as 'democratic' – but as a subversion of unchallenged authorial or producerly privilege. By showing that a particular representation in, for example, an advertisement could have been made differently, culture jamming interrupts the process of signification not by showing it to be wrong or dishonest, as the Adbusters approach would advocate, but by denying its permanence, thereby opening it to different formulations and thus different social relationships.

Thinking about the 'politicality' of culture jamming in this way enables us to conceive it as a 'radical democratic practice'. The radical democratic potential of culture jamming consists both in bringing the internal inconsistencies and differences of representation to the fore, while at the same time initiating them as 'agonistic' possibilities in which a plurality of tactical actions can be continually thought and questioned. In this way, culture jamming can be understood to enlarge the area of 'undecidability' that is crucial for generating new political possibilities and actions (Derrida in Mouffe, 1996). What a radical democratic theory of politics provides is a way to think these possibilities and actions within an undecidable terrain: to enact the 'spectacle' of the culture jam in such a way as to bring to prominence the undecidable and antagonistic conditions that sustain that 'spectacle' both as a form of representation in itself and as a subversion of representation as it is said and shown to function. To paraphrase Chantal Mouffe, by showing the structural undecidability of numerous areas of social and cultural representation culture jamming reveals the contingency of the process of cultural representation and meaning, widening in that way the field of political intervention and action (Mouffe, 1996: 2). Thought about in this way, culture jamming can be considered a radical democratic practice precisely because it enables us to further and enhance the categories of politics and democracy through political action, thereby keeping the question of politics and democracy radically 'open'.

#### 4.4 TACTICAL MEDIA IN ACTION 2.

What I want to do now is elaborate on this notion of the political as radically 'open' by thinking about its consequence for another area of tactical media. The example I want to use is that of the art/activist group Critical Art Ensemble (CAE) and their tactic of 'Electronic Civil Disobedience' (ECD). In 1995 CAE published a collection

of essays in a book called *Electronic Civil Disobedience and Other Unpopular Ideas*. The central theme of this book was concerned to elaborate a new thinking of civil disobedience (CD) for the Information age. In it they argued that the proliferation of new technologies and networked forms of communication like the Internet has given rise to new systems of informational power. These new 'institutions of power' reflect the decentralised networks in which they operate and therefore require new kinds of activism to penetrate and subvert them (CAE, 1995: 15). In an age of global, nomadic capital, CAE argue for the growth of 'nomadic resistance'. As with CD, CAEs model set trespass and blockades as central tactics. But to combat decentralised networks of power, they proposed decentralised, cell-based organisation: small alliances of hackers and activists, or 'hacktivists'. Fusing a situationist-inspired concept of contestational art, an understanding of the parallel nature of cultural and political action, and a hacker's deep understanding of how new technology functions, CAE described ECD as a launch point for contesting the nature of power and resistance in the information age. 'ECD is CD reinvigorated', they wrote. 'What CD once was, ECD is now' (Ibid.: 18). ECD, as a form of mass decentred electronic direct action, may utilise such tactics as virtual blockades and virtual sit-ins. Unlike the participant in a traditional civil disobedience action, however, an ECD actor can participate in virtual blockades and sit-ins from home, from work, from the university, or from other point of access to the Internet (Jordan and Taylor, 2004). The tactics of ECD thus emphasise the formation of new kinds of political activism organised through networks and ICTs.

What does a politics of the network look like? In a discussion of network forms of politics, Michael Hardt argues that networks move in multiple registers, displacing conventional oppositions and conditioning new modes of politics that are their own particular flow and translation (Hardt, 2002). I spoke about this in chapter three in relation to the formation of a dispersed 'network culture' that, through its 'lack' of unity and diffusion of point of transmission and control, is giving shape to new modes of organisation, such as listserves, file sharing networks, digital archives and social networks, to name a few. These emergent modes of organisation are not – strictly speaking – *in opposition to* the 'dominant' neoliberal/corporate hegemony over our information media (though they do undoubtedly suggest an 'alternative' organisational methodology) but occupy their own ground, as a new process of 'becoming' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987).

Hardt's account of network forms takes its theoretical cue from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, particularly their description of 'nomadic' and 'deterritorialised' systems or 'rhizomes' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). Deleuze and Guattari use the term rhizome to describe non-hierarchical networks of all kinds. These network forms operate not as an inversion of a particular system but move 'in between' them, as 'smooth spaces': 'a rhizome doesn't begin and doesn't end, but is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*' (Bogue, 1989; 104). Deleuze and Guattari oppose the rhizome to the model of 'the tree', which they argue symbolises a 'striated' or 'closed space' of hierarchical structures and linear thinking. Whereas smooth space is informal and amorphous, striated space is formal and structured. Movement happens differently within each of these spaces. Smooth space is an 'untimely' space. It is a space of becoming, of wandering (nomadic space), where the movement is more important than the arrival. In striated space, what is most important is arrival at the point towards which one is oriented: 'in striated space, lines or trajectories tend to be subordinated to points: one goes from one point to another. In the smooth, it is the opposite: the points are subordinated to the trajectory' (D & G, 1987: 478). Deleuze and Guattari are candid in their opposition to striated spaces, describing them as a model of 'totalising theory' that is specifically designed to function as a restrictive stratum, imposing its forms on a maximum of flows, particles, and intensities. The rhizome, however, is a non-hierarchical structure which deterritorialises strata and subverts hierarchies by engendering stems and filaments that seem to be roots, or better yet connect with them by penetrating the trunk, but put them to strange new uses (Ibid.: 15). Being 'rhizomatic' means, in other words, to affect new 'singularities' and 'becomings' through 'deterritorialised flows' and 'nomadic movements' that assume their own 'diverse time, processes and productions' (Bogue, 1989: 105). Deleuze and Guattari see the rhizome as offering some hope of bringing about a kind of 'liberation' from structures of power and dominance. Liberation, they conclude, comes from escaping the interiority of the strata: 'shedding the limitations of dominant reproductive systems' and 'increasing our territory by 'deterritorialisation' . . . extend[ing] the line of flight to the point where it becomes an abstract machine covering the entire plane of consistency' (D & G, 1987: 11; 510).

Taking their intellectual cue from Deleuze and Guattari's outline of rhizomic and nomadic structures, CAEs *The Electronic Disturbance* (1994) has incorporated ideas about 'nomadic dynamics' (11), 'nomadic power' (15), 'nomadic elite' (17, 23) and 'nomadic flow' (23) to describe new modes of power and resistance in



networks. While there is no explicit reference to Deleuze and Guattari, their second chapter 'Nomadic Power and Cultural Resistance' makes an implicit connection with nomadic forms of power. The main thrust of their argument is concerned with where power is located in networks. Network power is neither sedentary nor fixed in particular cities nor territories, they argue, but rather is fluid, mobile, dispersed and nomadic: 'The location of power – and the site of resistance – rest in an ambiguous zone without borders. . . how could it be otherwise, when the traces of power flow between nomadic dynamics and sedentary structures' (Ibid.: 11). A corollary of this is, CAE explain, that contemporary resistance to 'nomadic power' must resort to similar 'nomadic tactics'. They argue that new forms of opposition and resistance have to invent new strategies and tactics that counter new modes of nomadic power: 'Elite power, having rid itself of its national and urban bases to wander in absence in the electronic frontiers, can no longer be disrupted by strategies predicated on the contestation of sedentary forces' (Ibid.: 23). Instead CAE propose that certain old forms of resistance – such as street demonstrations – need to be modified to address new conditions. They thus outline a more concrete methodology about which tactics might prove useful in networks: 'Nomadic power must be resisted in cyberspace rather than in physical space . . . a small but coordinated group of hackers could introduce electronic viruses, worms, and bombs into the data banks, programs, and networks of authority . . .' (Ibid.: 25). In other words, CAE envision new forms of resistance as constituting a fundamental shift from 'physical' civil disobedience to ECD.

#### **4.4.1 Tactics as disobedience: electronic civil disobedience.**

In their 1995 collection of published essays CAE develop a more theoretical exploration of how to move protests from the streets onto the Internet, arguing for a 'rational strategy and tactical possibilities for nomadic resistance' (1995: 3). In this book they examine the tactics of street protest, on-the-ground disruptions and disturbance of urban infrastructure and they hypothesize how such practices can be applied to the infrastructure of the Internet. They outline a number of different tactics, including altering the content of an opponent's website and removing, adding or changing images or text. This is analogous to billboard alteration or other print/visual-based types of culture jamming in the Adbusters method. Another possibility is to launch a corrupted intelligent into a website, such as a virus or a Trojan meme, and to try and slowly disrupt or even bring down the website. This tactic was used in a 'strike' on the Microsoft website in 2004, with the aim of trying

to use the 'collective power' of infected computers to bring down the Microsoft web server.<sup>5</sup> This 'infrastructural' form of activism, attacking the very architecture of the net itself through blockage and disruption techniques, is central to CAE's approach to ECD. They explain it in the following way:

ECD is a non-violent activity by its very nature, since the oppositional forces never physically confront each other. As in CD, the primary tactics of ECD are trespass and blocking . . . Blocking information conduits is analogous to blocking physical locations; however, electronic blockages can cause financial stress that physical blockage cannot, and it can be used beyond the local level. . . Blocking information access is the best means to disrupt any institution, whether it is military, corporate, or governmental . . . (Ibid.: 13, 18).

Such infrastructural-based resistant Internet use can be described as nomadic in that the resistant actors themselves are a force dispersed in networks without any definite centre. Any resistant actor can initiate an action by, for instance, putting out a request that particular websites or email addresses be targeted on a given date or time. This 'resistant call' or 'message' is copied and (re)distributed over the Internet through Cc: listserves, mailing lists and newsgroups until it no longer resonates. According to Ricardo Dominguez of the Electronic Disturbance Theatre (EDT), both the message and the actors are nomadic, in that they travel through a 'rhizomic' networked structure acting against targeted sites (Dominguez, 1998).

The realisation and legitimisation of the Internet infrastructure as a site for nomadic actions has arguably opened up new possibilities for net politics, especially for those already disposed to direct action social movement tactics. But if the promise of ECD remained a theory until 1998 for CAE, the faction of the group which took the name Electronic Disturbance Theatre actualised it in the form of FloodNet, software intended to facilitate these nomadic actions. The FloodNet program was designed to direct a 'symbolic gesture' against an opponent's website. It works by repeatedly sending browser reload commands to a particular website, thereby creating a disproportionately excessive flow of traffic to that site and potentially causing it to crash. The idea – in theory at least, since most websites can sustain millions of hits without a problem – was that when enough EDT participants are simultaneously pointing the FloodNet URL (Uniform Resource Locator or website address) toward an opponent site, a critical mass prevents further entry. On

September 9, 1998, EDT exhibited this software in the form of a three-pronged FloodNet disturbance against websites of the Mexican Presidency, the Frankfurt Stock Exchange and the Pentagon to demonstrate international support for the Zapatistas against the Mexican government, against US military power, and against a symbol of international capital ([www.thing.net/~rdom/](http://www.thing.net/~rdom/)). However, this action drew a hostile response on a number of different fronts, including that of the so-called 'hacker community' itself. They argued that this virtual action conflicted with the hacker ethic of information-sharing, and thus that it constituted 'bandwidth abuse' since it would serve to block access elsewhere for people who may not have a clue what was causing their problem (Meikle, 2002: 152). Another critic was the internet theorist/activist Geert Lovink, who argued that FloodNet was simply 'bad activism'. In his analysis, the EDT's action would actually serve to disrupt the capacity of a genuine activist network to evolve. Arguing for a more ethical sense of what constituted net activism, Lovink suggested the model of McSpotlight ([www.mcspotlight.org/](http://www.mcspotlight.org/)) as an example of 'good' network utility. This, according to net critic Graham Meikle, is an ongoing debate. On the one hand, the strategic media model of McSpotlight, the anti-McDonalds website/portal that emerged from the protracted (1995 – 1997) McLibel trial of Morris/Steel Vs McDonalds, which focuses on consolidation, outreach, and connection and on its forum and archive function. On the other, the 'hit-and-run', event-driven spectacle of the tactical model (Ibid.: 152 – 3).

The EDT's response to these criticisms was to suggest that their mode of virtual action was just one tactic in a variety of strategies of tactical media. Dominguez explained in an interview that:

I believe that different methods of Electronic Civil Disobedience should be developed for use as quickly as possible by as many groups as possible, on as many levels as possible for both on-line and off-line activism. With non-violence and mass-representation as disturbance at the heart of each script (Krempl and Dominguez, 2000).

While the EDT actions have been criticised as either ineffective or else irresponsible, though, Meikle remarks that to see the value of EDT/FloodNet purely in terms of whether it can successfully 'bring down' a website perhaps misses the point. If the aim were simple trespass and blockage, a single hack would be more efficient in bringing down a server and blocking information. The point of virtual sit-



ins like EDT/FloodNet, however, is to get across how widespread the protest is rather than the denial of access to data or their conduits. The aim is not simply trespass and blockage but gaining a critical mass. FloodNet is primarily a *media event*, Meikle argues, designed to raise awareness of different situations, such as the Zapatistas in Mexico (Meikle, 2002: 154 – 5). How successful the action is in raising awareness of such issues is dependent, according to Meikle, on whether it can progress beyond short-lived spectacle and facilitate other actions and a deeper understanding of different political struggles. In other words, can it shift the emphasis from the 'means' of action to the 'ends' or outcome? Thus he writes that:

As the novelty of this kind of Hacktivism wears off, it may follow that future actions which take cyberspace as their site will be covered more in relation to their ends rather than their means. If so, the significance of FloodNet will be in its introduction of a new way of thinking about activist tactics . . . (Ibid.: 156).

A more general criticism of the FloodNet tactic has come from CAE in their 2001 book *Digital Resistance*. Here they argue against the 'spectacle' of the EDT, suggesting that ECD is – and should remain – an 'underground activity that should be kept out of the public/popular sphere . . . and the eye of the media' (2001: 14). According to CAE, ECD is neither 'Netwar' nor acts of cultural jamming, detournement, or media pranks. They assert that the kind of media manipulation attempted by the EDT is another 'dead tactic': 'all would-be adversaries are now more than capable of engaging in the media terrain and are consequently prepared for any potential 'hit' (Ibid.: 22). They therefore suggest that the EDT is engaged in a losing battle, since any subversive message is lost in the flood of information or is itself detoured through spin. CAE write that:

CAE still insists that productively challenging institutions will not occur through nihilistic gestures . . . [EDT] has already been sold for fifteen minutes of fame, fuelling a new round of cyberhype, but e-activists can bring a halt to this current media event by supplying nothing more (Ibid.: 22; 27).

In contrast to this judgment, the EDT continues to practise their particular brand of ECD. Their most recent action was carried out in May 2005 against the MinuteMen, an armed, right-wing anti-immigrant NGO that patrols the US/Mexico border. EDT called for a three day virtual sit-in, a FloodNet and email action to

coincide with the MinuteMen's annual convention in Las Vegas. According to the EDT's own analysis, more than 78,500 people from around the world joined the virtual sit-in against the MinuteMen. There were reports that at times the MinuteMenProject.com server was not responding. In addition, the action was linked from a number of different places, including US political newsletter/website CounterPunch.org, San Diego Indymedia, San Francisco Indymedia and the national US Indymedia, Italy Indymedia and Germany Indymedia, as well as being mentioned on WBAI Pacifica Radio in New York City in their report of the Global Indymedia MinuteMen Wrap-Up ([www.swarmtheminutemen.com/](http://www.swarmtheminutemen.com/)). According to Dominguez, actions such as this are about developing and adapting ECD actions, and thus would not be possible with a clandestine or underground model. ECD, he argues, is not a secret and anonymous 'cracking' into web servers in order to set off Distributed Denial of Service attacks (DDoS). 'These actions only represent one or two hidden individuals, and consequently reinforce the 'official line' that ECD is criminal or constitutes an act of terrorism'.<sup>6</sup>

#### **4.4.2 Realising the potential of electronic civil disobedience.**

This criticism of the clandestine model of ECD can, I think, be understood in relation to a number of different factors. One factor concerns the potential implications for critical/political action following the arrest of CAE founding member Steve Kurtz in 2004 following an FBI investigation. Kurtz was detained under the US anti-terrorism act after various laboratory equipment and materials (which were to be used in an exhibition entitled "the Interventionists: Art in the Social Sphere") were discovered in his home.<sup>7</sup> Another related issue involves CAE's willingness to engage in their work the difficult terrain that encompasses political activism and criminal action/terrorism in their questioning of networks and ECD. In *Digital Resistance*, for instance, CAE argue that ECD should continue to 'act' on the infrastructure of the Internet in order to 'subvert the mythologies through which the 'meaning' of the Internet is constructed'. The Internet, they contend, is culturally and politically bordered, and its 'meaning' is increasingly constructed under capital's variables of separation. Accordingly CAE explain that

. . . The current [US] state strategy seems to be to label as criminal/terrorism anything that does not optimise the spread of pancapitalism and the enrichment of the elite. If we lose the right to protest in cyberspace in the era of information capital, we have lost the greater part of our subjectivity . .

. we must demand more than the right to speak, we must demand the right to act in the 'wired world' (CAE, 2001: 37).

I have outlined my own criticism of this kind of netwar/conflict model of activism in chapter three. There I suggested that, while these actions envision networks as contestational spaces of resistance and opposition, this way of thinking about politics and networks has a tendency to render notions of openness, fluidity and nomadicality in essentialist terms that may serve to elide the complexities and contradictions that comprise networks themselves. Just as the nation-state appears obsolete for some, so too the term 'network' has become a pervasive metaphor to describe a range of phenomena, desires and practices in contemporary information societies (Rossiter, 2004). Activists pursue techniques of simultaneous disaggregation and consolidation via online organisation in their efforts to mobilise opposition and actions in the form of 'mutable affinities against the corporatisation of everyday life' (Lovink, 2002: 194 – 223). Thus, for instance, in the case of CAE it is not networks that are seen as 'problematic', but rather how those networks are 'serviced' and 'acted on' in our 'wired world' (i.e. by capital in collusion with the forces of 'the state'; and through ECD as a 'subversive action' that would service other models of cyberspace). CAE envision networks as organically 'open' and 'horizontal' such that a 'network of resistant cells' is powerful because it has too many heads to be killed. When one Internet node is destroyed, traffic flows around it, as impossible to trap as a dissipated gas' (CAE, 2001: 47). The clandestine model is therefore intrinsic to their understanding of ECD, since it constitutes, for CAE, a way to 'subvert and resist the control of virtual space (and/or control of the net apparatus) that is the new locus of power' (Ibid.: 32).

In what follows I will outline what I think are the problems with this account of networks by looking in more detail at Deleuze and Guattari's 'horizontal' model of the rhizome structure. But in drawing this section on tactical media and ECD to a close, I want to briefly draw attention to a short essay by Joanne Richardson on the subject of 'tacticality' and 'warfare' (Richardson, 2003). Richardson argues that, in the wake of September 11<sup>th</sup>, how we think about tactical media is in need of further questioning. In particular, she notes the way in which very different modes of politics often employ very similar methodologies in the mediascape to take up their struggles. Today's fundamentalist terrorism, she argues, is a mirror of the network society of a nomadic, global capitalism: 'Western educated Bin Laden militants don't belong to any specific territory; they travel the globe . . . use the Internet and



cellular phones, and have access to communication networks even in a desert cave' (2003: 347). Similarly, defining tactical media in purely oppositional terms, in relation to a named enemy, risks missing precisely their differences and inconsistencies, thereby rendering the term potentially meaningless. Certainly, the political and ideological differences between, say, EDT and fundamentalist terrorism are vast (ECD is not, after all, intended to bring about the destruction of 'western decadence'). But, Richardson claims:

Whether direct or concealed, offensive or defensive, using the strength of numbers or the artifice of diversion, both tactics belong to the art of warfare and have the same objectives: conquering the power of the enemy, taking possession of his sources of strength, and gaining public opinion by destroying the enemy's credibility. And perhaps this is the limitation of a media theory based on a distinction between tactics and strategies – ultimately both are a form of war against an enemy power . . . [defined] through an act of opposition (Ibid.: 349).

In this section I have drawn attention to the 'tactical' actions of CAE and the EDT, as well as to the more strategic model offered by McSpotlight. These cases of activism, production and exchange are different in their method of 'tacticality' and thus are not easily aligned with each other: CAE advocate a guarded and underground approach to Net activism; the EDT envision a more open and public spectacle; and McSpotlight represents a more conventionally organised network that provides infrastructural support, information exchange and communication forums. I would suggest that to group together these different initiatives within a theory of warfare and opposition misses precisely the way in which different contexts, ideas and possibilities of tactical media can be considered as new dimensions of politics. This difference entails that the politicality of forms of tactical media cannot be essentialised into a homogeneous 'resistance' but that their tactics will change according to new conditions. Tactical media can therefore only transpire as an 'emergent politics' that, to paraphrase Mark Poster, does not necessarily improve the position of existing groups as they are currently constituted but changes them in unforeseeable ways (Poster, 2001b: 3). I think we can view the potential of these modes of tactical media through the lens of an 'emergent politics' that may be active in different areas of activism and struggle, thus suggesting a varied and complex phenomenon. Although this emergent politics may constitute a particular 'form' of social action and political practice, as I have

discussed in the case of CAE and the EDT, it also raises the question of a new political language, one that does not conform to some easily recognised criteria of what it means to be political and to do politics. It is this notion of a new political language which I think provides a more radical proposal for tactical media, since it advises us to heed tactical media not in a simple reversal (i.e. anti-‘mainstream’, ‘alternative’, ‘oppositional’) but to put forth and conceptually to develop a multiplex standpoint in which both the subject (of politics) and the object (of politics) are displaced in new registers of understanding. This may in turn enable the creation of new networks, new media that may form the basis for new kinds of political relations that may be furthered by action. However, this can only happen, I want to suggest, if we can make available a more robust way to think about radical democratic politics in networks.

#### **4.5 DEFINING THE ‘CONDITIONS’ FOR A RADICAL DEMOCRATIC MODEL OF TACTICAL MEDIA.**

The preceding cases demonstrate the way in which Deleuze and Guattari’s theorisations on ‘nomadic’ and ‘deterritorialised’ systems have been extended to encompass different kinds of tactical activism in networks. It is quite clear therefore that their description of the rhizome has transpired as a useful critical tool for the consideration of politics in networks, and it is this that I have tried to show via a discussion of ECD. However, in considering the ‘rhizomic tactics’ of disruption and disobedience in groups like CAE and the EDT, I also want to make a number of critical interlocutions.

In what sense do ‘networks’ constitute rhizomes? Certainly, there are elements in the way we use and conceive of technologies like the Internet which may construct it as ‘smooth space’. This ‘smoothness’ may consist in its ‘openness’, its instability and tendency to metamorphosis, its resistance to traditional modes of regulation and censorship, its governing logic of access rather than possession, the unknowability inherent to its vastness and so forth. There are, therefore, some similarities between the network of taproots and computers that might inspire us to speak of a rhizomatic character of the Internet. Similar to the Internet, ‘any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other’ (D & G, 1987: 7). And like the rhizome, the system of connections between networked computers ‘may be broken, shattered at any given spot, but it will start up again on one of its old lines, or on new lines’ (Ibid.: 9). In addition, there may be strong ‘striating’ elements within this

'network of networks', such as encroaching commercialisation and the existing and controllable paradigms that are being used to subsume the 'space' of the net by, for instance, directing and monitoring users activity through Google-powered searches, all-in-one 'web experiences' provided by AOL, and identity management projects like Microsoft's .Net Passport.

However, conceptualisations of networking used by the theoreticians of 'rhizomatic politics', such as Hardt and Negri (2000; Hardt, 2002), and practically deployed by groups like the EDT, fail to grasp the situations being evoked by the Internet. I have argued, in my third chapter, that the Internet is not simply a 'space' of coordinate relations but rather a woven framework made up interlinked joins – which in social terms means interlinked groups and connections. This is applicable enough where there are easily identifiable, cooperating groups, such as NGOs. What is missing, however, is the sense of contingency within 'civil society' in which 'organising' may not take the form of 'organisations' but of an unevenness of contact at myriad points. Jurgen Habermas, for instance, presents the salons of eighteenth-century France and the coffee houses of Germany and England as comprising a form of civil society by promoting a space apart from the economy where people could exchange ideas and voice criticism on matters of shared interest or concern (Habermas, 1989). The public sphere was thus seen as mediating between the domains of the family and the workplace – where private interests prevail – and the state which often exerts arbitrary forms of power and domination. In this case a differential 'public sphere' is formed within civil society that fosters resistance to formal institutions of the state and public power. I have argued in my third chapter that this position overlooks important differences between physical proximity and interaction online, such as bodily location and the spatio-temporal configurations of networks, and thus presents a number of problems for the idea of the Internet as a 'new public sphere' (Khan and Kellner, 2005). However, what the issue of the Internet and civil society at least brings to the fore is the way in which the technology itself contributes to, and mediates between, different – often antagonistic – forms of interaction, social relations and politics.

A similar critique can be made of the concept of 'rhizome'. Despite its power of evocation the rhizome suggests a fixed form, albeit growing horizontally in various directions (such as Hardt and Negri's figure of the multitude). So here antagonisms exist only at the margins and not within the 'rhizomatic space' itself. These



antagonisms are conceived as those which, through the 'striated' actions of, say, corporatisation and commercialisation, attempt to control and erect fences around the 'smooth' and 'nomadic' surfaces of the rhizome, assuming it as their own – a 'control society', in which power is becoming integrated into every aspect of social life through interconnected networks (Hardt, 1998). This analysis has enabled authors like Hardt and Negri and Lovink and Schneider to project onto the multitude a foundational identity. In the latter's case, it is the incarnation of a 'digital multitude' that constitutes the 'next step' for tactical media practitioners in the formation of a new global civil society (Lovink and Schneider, 2002). While for Hardt and Negri, the multitude and rhizomic networks are almost interchangeable phenomena in the surpassing of empire. They anticipate the 'global multitude' will forge a new, liberating, collective force through 'being-against' empire. 'Being-against' allows Hardt and Negri to amass under the same rubric Chiapas, fundamentalism, and Tiananmen Square (2000: 54; 146 – 50). Participants in the Los Angeles riots of 1992 and the intifada may not realise it but, as part of the multitude, they are all refusing 'the post-Fordist regime of social control' (Ibid.: 55). These rebellions, regardless of their content, are postmodern and potentially liberating. Thus, despite their differences, all forms of action that resist contemporary modes of social control are part of the 'sea of networks' that constitute 'the multitude'. In Hardt and Negri's estimation, the difference between, for instance, CAE's interpretation of ECD and the actions of the EDT is no longer important – or indeed problematic – since rhizomic networks simply 'sweep away' opponents. They write:

Everyone who is authentically 'against' is on the same side of the barricades. In our times 'being-against' will release the multitude's 'desire' so that 'technologies and production' may be directed towards the formation of new, nomadic desires and rhizomic movements that cannot be contained and controlled within the disciplinary regime [of empire] (Ibid.: 253).

In this context, Hardt and Negri's project of an ever-expanding network as the *form* of 'the multitude' presents all struggles against empire as equivalent: 'the set of all the exploited and subjugated, a multitude that is directly opposed to Empire, with no mediation between them' (Ibid.: 60 – 3).

However, contrary to Hardt and Negri's claim, it is in fact quite clear that ICTs like the Internet *do* mediate, albeit in ways that are different from other media. Even as

one will note similarities between features of the Internet and earlier media for communication, such as letter writing, telephone, broadcasting and even post-it notes (bookmarking web pages, for instance), certain capacities and uses of Internet communication uniquely shape a user's perceptions and interactions. These influences extend beyond the interpersonal to the social and the cultural, enabling new forms of 'decentralised dialogue' as well as new individual and collective voices, relations and interactions, which may in turn constitute the 'building blocks' for new political formations and practices (Poster, 2001b). In my third chapter, for instance, I drew on John Frow's (2001) description of the 'dispersed and partially convergent' characteristics of the Internet to illustrate some of the ways in which it contributes to the formation of very different kinds of relations and practices – from emergent socio-technical forms like Indymedia and the Interactivist forum, to the proliferation of P2P networking and the creation of open architecture archives and 'wikis'. This differentiability is due, for the most part, to the way in which the Internet organises and mediates communication between individuals and the possible outcomes of these interactions at the dyadic, group and cultural level. I argue that the distributed and partially convergent nature of the Internet suggests 'uneven' and 'nonlinear' (Rossiter, 2004; Terranova, 2004) rather than organically smooth, nomadic and expanding network forms, and as such provides the conditions for very different – often antagonistic and contradictory – kinds of subjectivity to emerge in different situations. This can be usefully summarised in a quote from Mark Poster (2005), who writes that:

Cyberspace is hardly Hardt's smooth surface of transparency and control but a highly differentiated field of resistance, conflict and uncertainty . . . A Zapatista website counters the Mexican nation-state, a file sharing network resists copyright, a gay site in Singapore violates local regulations against non-heterosexual gatherings . . . (2005: 110).

To this one might also refer to the way in which ECD challenges different institutional forms through web-based activism. In addition, one can also mention the divergence of tactics between CAE's description of ECD as an 'underground activity' in the hacker tradition (CAE, 2001) and the EDT's rejection of this in favour of open and publicised actions and initiatives, such as virtual 'sit-ins' and the targeting of websites.

Following this, I suggest that the tendency in the work of Hardt and Negri and others to envision the 'libratory potential' of networks in the form of 'smooth', rhizomic surfaces of emergence may actually serve to elide the complexities and contradictions that comprise the uneven spatio-temporal dimensions of networks and their power of mediation.<sup>8</sup> By failing to adequately come to terms with the unevenness of 'cyberspace' – and hence the different kinds of politics and resistance and forms power and control that are occurring within it – the 'antagonistic conditions' that actually sustain and make possible different political actions and relations is rendered, in Laclau's terms, 'unthinkable' (Laclau, 2003). Moreover, if we continue to see antagonism merely as an external force in countenance to one's aims and objectives, 'opposed to and violat[ing] the fundamental community and solidarity . . . biopolitically singularised by the multitude' (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 395), we will fail to grasp the way in which antagonism is actually constitutive of different democratic outcomes. Following Laclau and Mouffe, we therefore need to come to terms with – and to understand – this dimension of antagonism as an ever-present possibility in social and political relations. That is not to say that all relations are always constructed antagonistically, but rather that the politics of cultures of dissent cannot be essentialised into a homogeneous 'resistance' (i.e. 'the multitude') – they emerge *precisely* to create an order, to organise 'strategically' in conditions which are always potentially conflictual, because there is this dimension of the antagonism. Thus, any alliances and coalitions between different groups remain contingent and undecided, built up through a process of testing and questioning. This is how groups like Adbusters, CAE and the EDT can form the basis for new modes of democratic politics, envisioning tactical media not as a *marker* of democracy in an of itself, but as an ever-emergent practice of radical democratic politics. Crucial to this debate is the relationship between the dimension of 'antagonism' that is constitutive of radical democratic politics and how this irreducible dimension can both be sustained and organised as a *condition of possibility*.

#### 4.5.1 Towards a radical democratic theory of tactical media.

In order to understand tactical media as a radical democratic practice what is required is a way to bring those differences and antagonisms to the fore, to see them as 'constitutive' of different political outcomes and possibilities. Therefore, I want to counter the expanded concept of 'the multitude' as a way of thinking about the radical possibilities of tactical media. Labelling the diverse practices of tactical



media under a synoptic presentation such as this risks missing precisely the differences (and thus politicality) of tactical media and rendering that term meaningless. By contrast, a more nuanced appraisal, one which both takes account of and actively contends with the differences in tactics, resistance and contestation, allows us to see the varied political situations of tactical media as *conditions of possibility*. As Stuart Hall (1992) has argued in the context of cultural enquiry and the academy, recognising that cultural objects are not innocent, we should be aware of the basic tension that is underlying life in the spectacle and that reaches into our academic sphere. He cautions that: 'if you lose hold of the tension, you can do extremely fine intellectual work, but you will have lost intellectual practice as politics' (Hall, 1992: 284). Hall's approach mirrors quite closely the argument I am trying to make in respect of tactical media. To paraphrase him, if we lose hold of the differentiability of tactical media, and the different forms of media activism and the ideologies they may shelter and preserve, we will lose the practice of tactical media as politics. We will fail to understand, for instance, the important differences between the tactics of CAE and FloodNet – and hence the significant debates (which I spoke about earlier) vis-à-vis questions of 'net terrorism' and political activism and what these terms entail for different tactical media approaches. And we will also overlook the crucial ideological disparity of different objectives of media/net activism as *sites* of struggle and contestation. For example, between left-wing and right-wing modes of tactical media (see note two).

By overlooking the highly differentiated field of resistance, conflict and uncertainty that comprise the methodologies of tactical media the constitutive characteristic of antagonism risks being reduced to a technical issue to be 'resolved' through the right kind of action and language (for instance, the multitude simply 'being against'). However, by practising a radical democratic thinking this dimension of antagonism can be 'put to use' in a much more productive and progressive way. Following Laclau and Mouffe, I consider the dimension of antagonism as something that is 'constitutive' of new political possibilities, as a 'force' that prevents a particular action becoming fully constituted in relation to its discursive 'other' – it's 'lack' (Torfing, 1999). In other words, a particular action can only manifest itself in the form of dislocation within a differential system, as something which underlines the inescapable contingency, unevenness and power-infused character of that system and its inability to fully constitute a stable order.

For instance, earlier in this chapter I demonstrated how the practice of culture jamming can be understood as an *interruption* in the process of signification. This occurs both as a 'dislocation' or subversion of the process of signification and the failure of a particular signifying act (such as an advertisement) to assume the space of cultural representation as its own. Emphasising dislocation raises the point that any particular signifying practice or representation is necessarily incomplete and exclusive, an unstable and temporary 'stabilisation' that never manages to constitute itself as a unified object. This applies to culture jamming as much as it applies to the target of subversion. The *radical* function of dislocation – in this case the consequence of culture jamming – is achieved when gaps, breakdowns and interruptions occur in the process of signification, thereby showing us that the 'terms' of signification are constitutively split by difference. This difference is not, however, a Deleuzean-inspired difference that continually produces new forms irreducible to any principle of explanation – categorical, quantitative, or otherwise: 'things in their wild and free [not yet actualised] state', as Deleuze puts it (Deleuze, 1994: xx). Rather, it is a difference which is 'constitutively antagonistic', in that it both subverts the process of signification and retroactively holds out the possibility of signification in other ways. This allows us to think about antagonism, first and foremost, as an irreducible dimension of the 'political', since it calls attention precisely to the 'system' of relations, exchange, communication, articulation and difference through which politics operates. And perhaps more crucially, and as I suggested above, it allows us to consider the ways in which difference contaminates politics both horizontally – for instance between CAE and FloodNet – as well as vertically – between activist and adversary, i.e. 'anti'-capitalist, 'anti'-corporate and so forth.

A further advantage of this kind of analysis is that, in spite of the fact that it problematises any straightforward theorisation of tactical media, it does allow for the fact that what may comprise tactical media may itself be both different and irreconcilable. To speak of tactical media as a 'radical democratic practice', for example, suggests not only that the practice of tactical media may itself change – may be transposed to different terrains (as in the 'culture jam' that shifts from one medium to another; or the mass decentred electronic direct action of ECD, which utilises virtual blockades and virtual sit-ins across different 'points' of the Net) – but that the 'content' of tactical media may change in ways that perhaps contradict, and thus entail negotiation with, other forms of activism. Here I think it is possible to think of the 'content' of tactical media changing in two respects. How tactical media

is thought about by activists may change, such that, for example, the practice of ECD may diverge according to the situation in question and the differential outcomes/translations of that action. And relatedly, what actually constitutes tactical media may change according to how one understands those outcomes/translations and the refusal to assuage or 'smooth over' the dimension of antagonism that actually sustains those actions and outcomes/translations as *conditions of possibility*.

In this way the terrain of tactical media activism can be broadened both in its scope and its radical possibilities. The aims, actions, practices and ideals of tactical media can be brought to the fore in a way that can mobilise new political passions, rather than descending into a 'ghettoised' politics of short-term initiatives and actions with non-negotiable ideas and convictions. This, in turn, should bring about new meanings and fields of application for the idea of democracy to be radicalised and relations of power to be contested.

#### 4.6 CONCLUSION.

The analysis of tactical media in this chapter emphasised the problematic aspects of this dimension of 'technopolitics', both in terms of its practical intent and its theoretical consequences. The object of tactical media in terms of its practical affects – disobedience, disruption and subversion – was identified as being overly centred on a 'politics of spectacle'. A number of examples were offered in support of this claim. These included the activities of cultural sabotage or 'culture jamming' – particularly as it is executed by groups like Adbusters – and ECD. It was suggested that while these cases present us with new explorations of politics in networks, their sine qua non of the spectacle of 'hit and run' practices had the effect of a 'ghettoisation' of politics. I used this term to depict the way in which the participant(s) in a particular tactical action, such as those suggested above, may become more concerned with defending the subjectivity of that action rather than endeavouring to question it or to think about it in other ways, to make it compatible with a democratic struggle.

This was identified as a particular problem for tactical actions like ECD. ECD actions such as those of the EDT draw on the notion of networks as 'rhizomatic'. The adjective rhizomatic is used in a political context as a way to describe the distribution, spread, and dispersion of information on the Net about ECD actions.



The EDT implements a form of 'networked politics' that takes the shape of tactical actions like virtual sit-ins and website blocking. This mode of politics is said to operate horizontally and underground, moving from node to node, announcing and distributing information about ECD actions in a 'differential fashion'. This 'difference' is understood in the Deleuzean sense as a kind of *absolute difference*, or the 'production of the new as such'. Difference, in this context, is taken to signify something that bears little, if any, residual trace of a structure but suggests a completely 'new line of becoming' (Colebrook, 2002). However, I argued that the Deleuzean vocabulary was mobilised in a way that left important areas of democratic politics unquestioned.

A particular area identified was that of 'the political' itself. Or more accurately, it was argued that the tactical action of ECD fails to adequately accommodate the antagonistic dimensions of the political. Consequently, ECD actions are vulnerable to the charge of 'foreclosing of politics'. That is to say, an ECD action such as a virtual sit-in is premised and understood as political in a way that collapses the antagonistic dimension necessary for democratic politics to occur. Struggle, conflict and context are foreclosed in advance so as to establish a space for the 'celebration' and 'aggrandizement' of the virtual sit-in as 'democratic practice', in and of itself (see Krempf and Dominguez, 2000).

To remedy this shortfall in the theory and practice of ECD an engagement with the theory of radical democracy was proposed. What a theory of radical democracy can bring to actions like ECD is a deeper understanding of 'the political'. By bringing to the fore the irreducibility, and hence 'undecidability', of the antagonistic dimension of the political, radical democracy provides a means to address, negotiate and contend with the terrain of democratic struggle in all its manifestations. By focussing on this antagonistic dimension as the 'scene' of politics, and refusing to suppress this dimension through the presumption of politics as a *given* (i.e. tactical media *is* political because it *is* subversive, disobedient and so on), radical democracy enlivens the very conditions in which 'alternative visions' of democratic struggle action can be mobilised. This mobility in the realm of political action/decision-making enjoins us not to exhaust the potential of tactical media and its contribution to new ways of thinking about politics and democracy. A radical democratic perspective therefore allows us to 'unpack' the vocabulary of the political (its 'antagonistic dimension'). It enables us to *think* the singularity of the

ideas of subversion, tacticality and disobedience relative to the responsibility of politics both as a common good and an ethical obligation.

The conclusion drawn was therefore that the practices included under the banner of tactical media would gain from a more robust theorisation of their radical democratic possibilities. To envision tactical media as a 'radical democratic practice' means to see it in a new way. It means, above all, to see the potential of tactical media not as a *marker* of democratic politics, but rather in terms of its capacity to impede the 'closure' of politics and democracy. The radical democratic potential of tactical media entails keeping 'alive' the question of politics and democracy by remaining energetic in its efforts to animate the conditions necessary to sustain the needs, interests, differences and dissensions that may enliven new democratic imaginaries. And it is the direction, and more specifically the organisation, of new democratic imaginaries which the following chapter on P2P file sharing endeavours to build on.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.next5minutes.org/n5m/index.jsp](http://www.next5minutes.org/n5m/index.jsp).

<sup>2</sup> Not only are there differences in the method of tactical media, but there are also differences in the ideological slant of tactical media. Tactical media is not an 'ideologically pure' method of political activism (Meikle, 2002); it has been employed in a number of ways, both by the political right and left. A few examples include: the clone website [Martinlutherking.org](http://Martinlutherking.org), which presents itself as pro-King but is in fact an historical revisionist project, created and hosted by the international white nationalist organisation [Stormfront](http://Stormfront); or the attack and website defacement of a number of US Indymedia collectives by the right-wing hacker group KOBE Headquarters ([KOBEBHQ](http://KOBEBHQ)), which prompted the Internet Liberation Front to launch a 'hacktivist' campaign against right-wing, pro-republican websites.

<sup>3</sup> See the Situationist International archives at: <http://www.nothingness.org/SI/>.

<sup>4</sup> See Notes from Nowhere (ed.) (2003) pp. 245. For more details on the respective 'jams' see, 1. The Barbie Liberation Organisation: <http://www.rtmark.com/blo.html> and 2. Jonah Peretti's 'Nike Sweatshop Email': <http://depts.washington.edu/ccce/polcommcampaigns/peretti.html>.

<sup>5</sup> However, the problem with any computer virus is that it rarely has the intended effect. The mentioned MyDoom and Blaster viruses were designed to infect any number of home PC's which in turn utilise the combined strength of those computers to attack – among others – the Microsoft website. The Microsoft site was brought down, for approximately two hours; and only really as a precautionary measure by Microsoft itself. Indeed, all the 'attack' really achieved was to antagonise many ordinary users, double the sales of anti-virus software from companies like McAfee®, as well as increasing the traffic through sites such as AOL and Microsoft as users sought relevant technical information. See, 'MyDoom worm spreads as attack countdown begins', *CNN.com*, 29/01/2004. Available at: <http://www.cnn.com/2004/TECH/internet/01/29/mydoom.future.reut/>. And also, 'Microsoft brushes off MyDoom', *News24.com*, 04/02/2004. Available at: [http://www.news24.com/News24/Technology/News/0,,2-13-1443\\_1478515,00.html](http://www.news24.com/News24/Technology/News/0,,2-13-1443_1478515,00.html).

<sup>6</sup> Ricardo Dominguez, 'Diogenes Online: Gestures against the Virtual Republic': <http://www.thing.net/~rdom/>. Last accessed on 20/06/2005.

<sup>7</sup> For details on the Steve Kurtz case see 'FBI abducts Artist, Seizes Art', Center for Cognitive Liberty and Ethics'. Available at: [http://www.cognitiveliberty.org/news/cae\\_arrest1.html](http://www.cognitiveliberty.org/news/cae_arrest1.html).

<sup>8</sup> For a wide-ranging and critical appraisal of empire and the multitude see the essays collected in: Paul A. Passavant and Jodi Dean (eds.) (2003) *Empire's New Clothes: Reading Hardt and Negri*. London: Routledge/Taylor & Francis.



**CHAPTER 5.****PEER-TO-PEER SHARING *TECHNIQUES* AS RADICAL DEMOCRATIC CONDITIONS.**

This chapter is concerned with an elaboration of file sharing – known also as peer-to-peer (P2P) – from the point of view of its radical democratic potential. Here I want to expand on some of the arguments made previously, about the responsibility of continuing to think politics and democracy in line with new social, cultural and technological phenomena, in order to look at how certain practices associated with the extension of the ICTs hold out the potential for the creation of new forms of radical democratic politics. That is, where chapter four was concerned with the radical possibilities of tactical media together with the responsibilities of ‘tacticality’ as a political initiative, this chapter relates to the discernment of P2P sharing as a political practice. While the practice of P2P sharing does not conform to conventional contexts of ‘the political’ that are premised along hierarchical lines or through perceptions of ‘the party’ as an institutional form, I nevertheless suggest that it opens the possibility of new ways of thinking about politics. In particular, I want to argue that it sustains a new articulation of the citizen/consumer, producer/receiver and subject/object relations, subsequently raising new political questions concerning the interaction and organisation of communicating individuals within the network of networks that comprise the Internet.

In pursuing an analysis of P2P sharing as an emergent area of political enquiry I want to call attention to the potential of these new relations to reconfigure the ways in which we engage and understand fundamental notions like politics and democracy. I intend to argue that P2P sharing extends new ‘radical democratic conditions’ that hold open the means to identify and describe new patterns of democratic organisation. To understand P2P sharing in this way, however, I suggest that we must first think of it as a political practice. Not ‘political’ in the sense that it conforms to some already established criteria of what it means to be political and to do politics. But ‘political’ precisely because it provides a way to keep the question of politics and democracy open. This refers, above all, to the potential of sharing techniques to generate new modes of consumption and distribution, production and organisation, and experience and knowledge, which in turn raise new questions concerning the ‘stability’ of those categories, how we understand their organisational power and how we might think about them in the future.

For instance, in this chapter I want highlight some of the ways in which the outlined practice of P2P sharing can be seen as extending 'other' ideas of democratic organisation. One aspect of P2P technology that I want to consider is that of the way in which the principle of 'sharing' can be extended into different domains, over and above those of the entertainment industries and music file sharing. In particular, I will focus on the unfolding of sharing techniques in the field of academia. Following the relevant literature in this area, I argue that the potential of sharing techniques in academia to open up new patterns of acquisition, communication, exchange and practise through which to increase both readership and exposure of material and scholarly work may not represent a specific 'new economy' (Poster, 2001: 58) or an alternative form of capitalism (G. Hall, 2003). But what it does perhaps suggest is the possibility of establishing new spaces of organisation and exchange which question both institutional authority and publication policies by redrawing our relationship to the politics of knowledge acquisition and dissemination, including how it is practised and understood.

By investigating the way in which 'sharing' techniques are evolving in different areas it is possible to demonstrate how the emergence of new techniques and principles of exchange may interrupt established frameworks that endeavour to legitimise and define the 'organisation of things' as *they are*. Further, I suggest that we can link this in many ways to the democratic possibilities this may harness.

## **5.1 FILE SHARING: A SHORT HISTORY.**

In this section I consider what I suggest is the potential of P2P sharing as an emerging radical political practice. Here I argue that this potential is discernible in relation to P2P's marking out of a new articulation of the citizen/consumer categories, redrawing established relationships by positioning the individual or subject as a key determinant in the dissemination of digital objects. I want to begin, however, by adding some flesh to the bones of the practice of P2P sharing. I want to explain what it is, how it has transpired, and the ways in which the culture of 'sharing' has developed together with the spread of the ICTs, in particular the Internet.

### **5.1.1 The origins of file sharing.**

The impact of the Internet on processes of reproduction and distribution, as well as on current standards and assumptions concerning relations between producers and consumers, is marked; though such a development is not merely confined to the short history of the Internet. In the past 30 years we can point to an array of technological advancements wherein the line dividing the associate functions of the producer and the consumer have become increasingly blurred: from the development of the audio cassette in the 1970s, which enabled consumers to make reasonably high quality copies of vinyl records, to the expansion in the mid-to-late 1980s of sampling techniques, which were exploited in particular by hip-hop artists like Public Enemy to create a new, radical sound that has changed the way we experience music (Frith et al, 2004), and later the innovation of re-writable CDs and DVDs, which have extended to the user the ability to make precise copies of text, audio and visual imagery at great speed and minimal outlay. However, it is arguably the case that the Internet has taken such practices to new levels, particularly in the ways it enables cultural artefacts like music to be shared or exchanged on a peer-to-peer basis, as is the situation with file sharing. Consider the following account by Mark Poster:

The Internet offers the consumer such a vast domain of information for easy and cheap reproduction that one can no longer think of web 'surfers' *merely* as consumers. Digitised music made available on the web may be downloaded and played on one's computer, transferred in digital form to a cheap portable player, or 'burned' on to a blank compact disc. The distribution of music, like all cultural artefacts, may now flow directly from artist to consumer (2001b: 47 – 8).

To this last sentence one might also add 'from artist to consumer, and back again'. For example, seminal US hip hop outfit Public Enemy's latest album *Revolverlution* (originally only made available on MP3 file format) contained, on its eventual CD release, a number of tracks that had been remixed, sampled and shared by fans through online communities such as PublicEnemy.com, Slamjams.com and BringtheNoise.com. By launching their album initially as a free music file, and then over a year later as a reworked CD version, Public Enemy's *Revolverlution* can be seen as undermining existing patterns of production, distribution and consumption by redrawing the context in which both 'consumers' and the sentinels of authorship can be seen and understood to function (the underpinning of the 'big pipe down'



model mentioned earlier). How do artists such as Public Enemy's Chuck D feel about this: 'I think my feelings are obvious; I think it's great'.<sup>1</sup>

The brief example given above illustrates quite clearly the potential of sharing techniques to generate new spaces of radical stimulus 'outside' established networks of exchange. In theory, it is no longer necessary to obtain a copy of music by going to a retail outlet or even browsing the web at sites like Amazon.com. The musical commodity no longer needs to take the material form of a cassette, a CD or a mini disc – on the Internet it may exist in digital form and be uploaded straight on to a computer harddrive, at which point it can then be transferred on to an MP3 player or 'burned' on to a re-writable CD. Moreover, such a process requires limited technical know-how: one can download a small decoding program or file such as eDonkey or Gnutella and then search and download the music – or file – that you require. Even copying that data to CD is relatively straightforward, given that computer operating systems like Microsoft's Windows XP are supplied with user-friendly CD burning applications such as Sonic's 'Record Now' as standard. Music files can thus be shared, cost-free, between users (rather than strictly as consumers) and, as we have seen, in certain circumstances, reworked and redisseminated using those same techniques and procedures.

P2P sharing has been called the biggest application breakthrough on the Internet since the introduction of web browsing software some ten years ago (Berners-Lee & Fishetti, 2000).<sup>2</sup> P2P technology dates back to the origins of the Internet, when only a dozen computers were connected to the ARPAnet network linking a few universities together.<sup>3</sup> Then there was little or no security and any user linked to the network could view any other's files by connecting to their computer directly. The basic principle behind P2P is that each user on the network (peer) can link up with any other user's computer and share information – usually files – with them. File sharing is the act of making certain files (typically, MP3, MP4 or WMV) stored on your computer harddrive available for other users or 'peers' to download, thus 'sharing' them. Other users also share their files to affect a vast online collection or archive. Basically, you use a file sharing program – the most popular of which are eDonkey and Overnet, currently used by over 3 million 'clients' at any one time according to SlyckNews.com – to search this diffuse assortment for files that you are interested in and then download them directly from other users' harddrives (usually referred to as 'download sources').

In principle, of course, the practice of sharing files could already be established with standard web technology, such as FTP (File Transfer Protocol). Users could create a website, load it with content they wish to share, and allow search engines to locate and index that content. Other users could then locate the content if they used relevant key words in a search engine. However, one might identify two main reasons why file sharing tools were developed in spite of the existence of standard web technology: (1) inexperienced users may find it difficult to set up and maintain a web server on their own computers; (2) P2P users want to share specific objects – typically digital music files, although images and other media types (Films and computer games, for example) can be shared as well – but existing Internet search engines do not specialise in the types of formats used for file sharing (notably Mp3) and often return search results much broader than that which is typically required. By contrast, installing a specific application to do the file searching for you reduces the complexity of this process, making it more ‘user’ or ‘peer oriented’.

Early attempts at P2P networks include the now infamous Napster service.<sup>4</sup> Though it may seem a little outmoded now, I think it is worth perhaps revisiting its brief history, since the rise and demise of Napster has had significant implications for the ways in which P2P technology has developed subsequently. Napster’s success revolved around the transferral of digital music into MP3 file formats. MP3 files are Internet specific, enabling individual users to make free copies of their personal music collections. To this extent, MP3 merely represents a technological update on domestic cassette taping and the corresponding debates over piracy of the 1970s: MP3 is open standard, without copyright protection, and so makes it difficult for record companies to impede people copying and distributing their products without first paying for them. According to Hall (2003), the main difference between home taping and MP3 is that the latter is both easier and more efficient for sharing copied material. ‘In marked contrast to cassettes, MP3 files can be shared from user-to-user over the Internet, stored on their computer harddrives, and then [either ‘burned’ on to a CD], played back on their computer or on MP3 players’. And this is where Napster comes in. Napster transformed the status of individual copying by organising the process of exchange, simultaneously increasing the amount of recorded material available (G. Hall, 2003).

Based on a client-server architecture, Napster was originally designed to share MP3 music files across the Internet. The clients connect to a central server and report what files they wish to provide for sharing. The server adds these files to its

search lists. Clients then issue search requests to the server, which then responds with the search results, consisting of filenames and clients providing those files. Because file transfers are user-to-user the server isn't involved in storing or transferring the actual MP3 files; it only tells clients where to get what they are looking for. This structure is called a 'hierarchy', in the sense that all users' computers 'look up' to the central server. One of the most appealing aspects of Napster was that it did not provide encryption of any kind: files were shared and transferred in the open. In that way, the cultural object – in this case music – becomes open to a new relation of exchange, allowing it to be shared with a multitude of separate users, and even alteration, such as combining your own music lists.

However, the popularity and commercial goals of Napster resulted in highly visible, complex legal proceedings concerning the redistribution of intellectual property. High profile lawsuits by several major record companies – under the auspices of the RIAA – pertaining to the legality of Napster eventually closed the service down. Napster initially contested the proceedings, arguing that it could not regulate what users shared. This motion was defeated by the RIAA's counter-claim that Napster could, if it so desired, screen what passes through it.<sup>5</sup> Napster suffered the fatal flaw that by using a central server to distribute files through, it was also vulnerable to attack – in the most noteworthy instance, legal attack. Because all file sharing transactions were made via the central server, even if the file being exchanged never passes through the server itself, the agreement to trade is made there. This gives those who maintain the server (in this case Napster) the ability to regulate transactions by only allowing exchanges they deem appropriate (Menn, 2003).

Napster undoubtedly popularised the idea of file sharing. But the centralised structure of Napster contributed also to the demise of Shawn Fanning's pioneering service. The obsolescence of centralised music file sharing networks such as Napster can in that way be likened to a kind of 'digital' natural selection. Just as VHS vanquished Betamax in the 1980s as the video format of choice, so the first generation of file sharing technology has been superseded by newer, decentralised network technology. The emergence of new P2P systems which are independent of either a centralised server or directory extend the potential for creating new networks of sharing, together with the generation of 'other' practices of acquisition and exchange.



### 5.1.2 File sharing grows up.

New P2P networks, such as Kazaa, Gnutella and Morpheus, have been designed to avoid the mistakes of Napster. Crucially, these systems do not have a central server, allowing each user to connect *directly* with other users. A good analogy for these new P2P networks is that of a postal system. Each city provides its own postal service and links itself with other nearby cities. Collections of cities form regional post offices which then link with other regions. At the top level, countries link entire postal systems to other countries. The effect is a network where anyone in any location can send a 'package' to any other location, but no central authority controls the entire system. In a P2P system like Kazaa, each user is a single (IP) address in the 'delivery system'. As each user logs in to a network, they attach themselves to another user. These groups of connected users become linked, those larger groups link with other large groups, and so on until an entire network is created. All of this is facilitated by the P2P software or program, and is usually hidden from the user.<sup>6</sup>

Another P2P system is BitTorrent. BitTorrent is different from Kazaa in that it allows multiple users to download and exchange the same files at the same time. It is similar in many ways to a pyramid system, whereby user A downloads something, user B takes it from them, who in turn is providing it to user C, and so on and so forth. This system of file sharing is premised on the notion of networks as 'communities'. The central idea here is that each user facilitates the other user, and so on down the line, so that more users' means more files. Two popular P2P communities are Overnet and eDonkey. These two networks are different still, in that they assign each file on the network a unique ID, thus enabling those files to be located and downloaded or transferred by more than one user at the same time. Because Overnet and eDonkey download from each file simultaneously, the more people there are sharing a particular file the faster it downloads. The popularity of these two communities has seen their combined user-base expand to over 1.5 million (see <http://www.slyck.com/>).

Other P2P networks operate in a slightly different manner to the abovementioned systems. Networks like Blubster, for example, offer anonymising techniques that shield the identities of users. This network operates using basic P2P structured software without a central server. But in addition to this, it allows clients to download via a proxy server – basically, a mechanism by which one computer

'fronts for' another system in responding to protocol requests – thus enabling the user's identity to remain private. Blubster takes advantage of the strong P2P community model (such as eDonkey) while simultaneously delivering an unspecified file sharing process that could be said to preserve the open ethic of decentralised networking.

The expansion of both new P2P file sharing systems, together with a burgeoning P2P user-base, has coincided with the steady increase in the take-up of broadband technology, which has gradually reduced in price: from £45.00 per month with BT in late 2001 to, in some cases, less than £20.00 at present. In the same way that email became perhaps *the* application of narrowband or 'dial-up' Internet connection, allowing the comparatively speedy transfer of digital files, text, images and audio data, it is downloading that is rapidly becoming the driving force behind broadband. This can be seen in relation to the kinds of advertising copy that increasingly headline broadband services. Many broadband suppliers, including BT, Virgin, NTL, Tiscali and Blueyonder, actively market their high-speed connection with the assurance of 'ten times faster file transfers and downloads'. Given that the practice of downloading files has been accepted as perhaps the standard for exchanging and distributing music over the Internet (as the success of Apples iTunes demonstrates), the expanding user-base for newer, often very different P2P networks ought not to surprise us that much at all.

These new P2P networks turn on its head the perception of file sharing merely as the delivery of files between sender and receiver. With networks like eDonkey and Overnet, for instance, there is no definitive status extendable to those two categories: the *sender* of a file is at the same time a *distributor* of that file as well as being a *receiver* of it. In the main, one might say that the advent of wide-scale file sharing, largely initiated by the Napster software application, has given rise to a phenomenon which together utilises and builds upon the most basic, yet fundamental aspect of the Internet – that is, its decentralisation of organisation. The new generation of decentralised P2P networks can be likened, in many ways, to throwing a bottled message into the ocean: the message may get to the destination, but no one knows the full path of neither its journey nor what is in each bottle. This diffuse and variable pattern of exchanges disrupts established structures of production, control and distribution by redrawing the status both of cultural objects and their reduction to a single system of exchange (i.e. capital), along with the tendency to define their consumption – and the role of the consumer

– through this territory. In this context, the potential of P2P sharing is discernible precisely in the way that it challenges this basic understanding of ownership and control (including the structures and bodies that legitimise those patterns of ‘flow’). By setting those categories in diverse arrangements it is possible to consider the means by which P2P may open new possibilities for the creation of different spaces of communication, organisation and exchange. This can be seen in relation to the way in which P2P enables both a re-emphasis and rearticulation of the conditions of ‘sharing’ and the value of ‘community’, which have together been systematically displaced from any democratic imaginary in favour of the neo-liberal consensus that has been the hegemonic horizon of world politics for the last 30 years (Bourdieu, 1998; Leys, 2003). And this is where I think that practices of P2P sharing emerge as important markers in the direction and understanding of new democratic cultures of politics, as they undoubtedly raise new ethical and political questions for institutional organisation and authority and our relations with/to it.

## **5.2 TOWARDS A NEW ARTICULATION OF DISTRIBUTION/CONSUMPTION.**

The synergy of technologies that has produced P2P networks – including the progression from analogue to digital code, the manufacture of smaller and cheaper personal computer systems, the massification of the Internet and the simplicity of web browsing – potentially transforms how we understand and think about technology, both as a social and cultural construct as well as in a political context. Beyond the creation of electrons, P2P networking is not manufacturing/production in the traditional sense: no material is produced, and no one owns the means of distribution. This actually draws a line between the first swathe of P2P programs like the original Napster service, which kept a central directory of swappable files (thereby becoming a central part of the operation), and more recent P2P developments, such as eDonkey, Overnet and the subsequent incarnations of the various Gnutella networks, which merely provide the enabling software that can be utilised, like so many other products, for legal and illegal file transfer.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the creators of the Gnutella program, Justin Frankel and Tom Pepper, can no more claim to be its owners than anyone else. When the original Gnutella site was taken down by AOL (America Online) in 2000, the actual software was decoded by a loosely organised team called Nerd Herd (<http://www.thenerdherd.co.uk/>), who promptly redistributed the program on a server-less basis. The Nerd Herd team, who claim never to have met each other, challenge the basic understanding of ownership in two distinct ways. Firstly, they do not own or directly profit (financially)



from the actual development and dissemination of Gnutella. In this way, the Gnutella program could be described as 'open source', in that the actual programming code is openly accessible rather than protected, and so is available to adapt and customise, with other networks such as Limewire being able to connect to it. Secondly, neither do they conform to claims of ownership regarding the digital files distributed within the system; they merely organise the transferral of those files between users' computer harddrives. Here we can therefore see how the Gnutella program actually recasts the proprietary and legal frameworks that have traditionally framed the producer/consumer relations. What a P2P network like Gnutella brings to the fore is, I think, a number of new ethico-political considerations and values concerning the diffusion of these emergent socio-technical forms of organisation, the 'uncommodification' or 'sharing' of information and the schematics of ownership.<sup>8</sup>

When I talk about P2P sharing as challenging the basic understanding of ownership and commodity forms, I do not argue that it should be conceived in terms of express opposition to the very foundations, perhaps even the very survival, of the music and entertainment industries themselves – though it is clearly something of anathema to them. Rather, I refer to the ways in which P2P sharing elicits the potential for a type of 'restructuration' cultural production. That is, a reordering of cultural production and its associate practices, including the distribution and consumption of cultural objects, in what is an unconventional and decentralised (i.e. not the traditional delivery model of one-to-many communication) manner.

As a digital cultural object – and perhaps unlike the material object, such as a music CD, which has a basic monetary value placed upon it according to certain market forces – the ubiquitous music file is premised along the lines of sharing, of making something available to all users. Not only does this carry forward the conventional subject-object relation by augmenting considerably the efficacy of producing mass cultural objects and disseminating them on a global scale; it also recasts the subject-object relation by reordering and redirecting cultural objects like music files in new ways and through new processes of interaction. This can in turn be said to disrupt the received processes of production, distribution and consumption which, in the context of decentralised digital networks, are rendered more fluid and thus open to redirection. As Mark Poster has commented: 'like digital text and writing, [a] digital music file transforms the user into a creator, and a distributor' (Poster, 2001b: 97). Although I would add an important parenthesis to this: it is not P2P

sharing per se that challenges the organised sentinels of ownership and copyright, but the possibilities it extends to individual users to raise new questions – and in so doing perhaps even transform particular ideas – concerning the propriety of those structures. Or to put it differently, the decentralisation of the server-client relationship through P2P sharing undermines the traditional producer-consumer commodity delivery model by opening up the ‘spaces’ through which those relations are legitimised to a greater degree of uncertainty.

On the part of the industry, and in particular the music institutions, one can say that there has been a failure to understand – or to want to understand – what they are dealing with, as well as the technology that makes P2P both possible and possible to develop. Witness, for example, the escalation of P2P networks since the demise of the first Napster, which have increased ten fold in the space of 3 years, with an estimated 57 million file sharers in the US alone.<sup>9</sup> Of course, it is also noteworthy how advantageous technological innovation has itself been to the music distribution cartels. They have sold to the average consumer the corresponding albums on vinyl record, 8 track, audio cassette and, more recently, CD and Mini Disc. With each new generation of technology the product/object has become easier to manufacture and distribute while their prices have held steady or increased. At the same time, those technological gains have also worked for the consumer, with the average person today having access to vast archives of recorded material, allowing them to make their own high quality reproductions. This steady expansion of technological devices appears, superficially at least, to be mutually beneficial to all, with the relationship between producer and consumer at once preserved and redefined in a way that could be said to mirror Adam Smith's reading in *Wealth of Nations* (1776) of an ‘economic equilibrium’ of supply and demand.

With the evolution of online file distribution, however, the challenge for the record industries is at once more immediate and uncertain. For the issue is less about copyright infringement or declining record sales and the vast column inches these have garnered in the global media space; it is really about controlling the means of production and distribution. For many years the recording industry owned and controlled the means of recording and distributing their intellectual product – music. Very few private citizens possessed their own pressing equipment for vinyl records, and prospective musical acts were at the mercy of the music corporations. But the extensive advancement of digital electronics and computers, not to mention the vast array of networking capabilities, including P2P systems, e-archiving and

wireless (WiFi) networking, has put personal digital recording studios and duplication methods *potentially* within the reach of anyone. While the distribution of new technologies may, on the one hand, reinforce relations of cultural capital, hierarchy and distinction, opening out what has been tellingly termed a 'global digital-divide' (Norris, 2002; Warschauer, 2003), they also proffer the potential to supplement the formation of a genuinely dispersed 'network culture', in which new conditions and relations of organisation and interaction between communicating individuals can emerge.

What the practice of P2P sharing indicates is, then, a potential rupturing of existing relations, exacerbating their uncertainty to the point where their authority is opened up to new questions. Accordingly, these digital forms of communication and transmission introduce new challenges to, and expose supplementary tensions between, both users and the sentinels of authorship, including the increasing diffusion of relations between them and the standpoint from within which a (political) discourse developed to elucidate them as *distinct*. Through P2P sharing the organisation of exchange is at once more 'repetitive' (digital files being of course easily duplicated) and 'variable' (networks, by their very nature, being uncoordinated, in the sense that everything is juxtaposed to everything else). The erstwhile distinctions between production and consumption, consumer and citizen and subject and object become, in this way, increasingly blurred, with the P2P user/client position carrying purchase as a key determinant in the distribution and dissemination of new kinds of digital objects. Moreover, this has implications not only for the territory of the 'commodity' itself, including the frameworks that give that commodity meaning as a commodity (i.e. its classification as an economic good; its monetary value as determined by the market; the fact that it can be processed, resold and turned to commercial advantage, etc.), but also in the ways in which it cuts across social inveteracies and structures of experience and understanding.

To illustrate the preceding point we can touch upon the way in which P2P sharing carries the potential for mobilising new structures of experience and understanding. P2P sharing is not simply about the basic economics (or 'anti-economics') of 'free' music as opposed to consumption for profit; it also has to do with the expansion of 'fields of experience' beyond those perceived or directly controllable by established institutions. Thus, on the one hand, a 'controlled experience': we purchase a material commodity like a CD, we take it home, listen to it, enjoy it, and hopefully repeat this process. While on the other, an experience that is not wholly reducible



to that logic – for instance, experimenting with new ways of distributing and sharing cultural objects, together with the expression of different experiences of enjoyment this may generate (sharing a music file, knowing that it is free, building a vast archive of music and so forth). In this sense, P2P is not *exclusively* about the copying and sharing of music (or any other kind of file); it also has to do with the bypassing of control over representation and other allied media and merchandising interests that record and entertainment corporations also manage. On a rudimentary level, if ‘consumers’ are not going into record stores, then it is also likely that neither are they buying the videos, DVDs, posters and other related merchandise of their preferred pop-icons. Accordingly, and in the eyes of the entertainment industries, we are no longer interpellated in our role as a consumer of that ‘brand’, or to participate in its continual circulation (buying the CDs, videos and posters, etc.). Here we can therefore see how P2P sharing potentially disrupts this experience, this ‘loop’, particularly in the ‘viral’ way in which it organises exchanges. P2P sharing encourage individuals to pass on a file or files to others, generating the possibility for exponential growth in those files’ duplication and availability. This means, in turn, that that object (in this case a digital music file) also becomes open to different structures of experience – including those not grounded in an inured sense of consumption. In other words, the diffuse *form* of P2P file sharing introduces into the production/consumption nexus a different way of understanding and consuming as well as experiencing cultural objects.

Thought about in this way, P2P sharing opens up new questions concerning how we think about institutional authority and its powers of ‘organisation’ and ‘regulation’. By enabling the ‘ordinary’ user to engage not only in the technical dynamics of the control and dissemination of digital objects, but also in the new structures of experience and understanding this may elicit, P2P sharing can be understood to play an important part in reorganising both conventional forms of exchange and structures of experience. It is also for this reason that I believe there is an identifiable tendency with P2P sharing towards the shaping of new ideas and practices of organisation which undermine the institutional and ‘controlled experience’ of consumption by privileging the ‘recreation’ and ‘mobilisation’ of structures of experience.

In order to understand and to think about how P2P mobilises new structures of experience and organisation, I propose that we consider it in line with the ‘mythical’ metaphor as extended in the work of Ernesto Laclau (1990). This will allow us to

bring into play other ways of exploring the potential of P2P sharing beyond simply the realms of music file sharing and/or its perceived 'legitimacy'.

### 5.3 HOW P2P NETWORKS MOBILISE 'MYTHICAL SPACES'.

The understanding I advance in respect of P2P file sharing is that it operates in a situation of 'radical disorganisation'. P2P sharing 'organises' the exchange of digital files over the nonlinear networks of the Internet. A good example is the way in which a P2P network like eDonkey executes exchanges according to this situation. Each user or client on eDonkey is interconnected in a nonlinear way with every other user, and this situation is amplified, though at no time centrally controlled or directed. And yet, at the same time, eDonkey is actually a facilitator between that diffusion of users; it 'organises' how that 'disorder' works, and it provides a content or structure through which it is possible to interact with other users, other file sharers. In this sense, P2P sharing is not *simply* a 'space' of exchange or organisation, at least not in the straightforward understanding of that term, where each thing is in one place and has identifiable relations by co-ordinates to all other things. Rather, it can be said to mobilise something more like a 'mythical space'.

Ernesto Laclau's explanation of 'mythical space' (1990) provides a way of framing this discussion of P2P sharing so as to bring to the fore its radical possibilities. Laclau's principle contention is that the notion of myth refers to a 'space' of representation, an organising point that bears no relation with the dominant 'structural objectivity'. In that way, he writes, 'myth is a principle of a given situation, whose terms are external to what is representable in the objective spatiality constituted by the given structure'. The objective condition for the emergence of myth is, therefore, a structural dislocation – or a situation of potential chaos or disorder. And the 'work' of myth is to suture that dislocated space through the constitution of a new organisational space. Accordingly, for Laclau

. . . the effectiveness of myth . . . involves forming a new objectivity or singularity by means of the representation of the dislocated elements. Any objectivity, then, is merely a crystallised myth. The moment of the myth's realisation is consequently the moment of the subject's eclipse and its reabsorption by the structure (1990: 61).

For Laclau, the mythical space is constituted as a critique of the 'lack' of structuration accompanying the dominant order, as the 'incompleteness' of the structural space. In this sense, however, mythical space has a dual function and a dislocated identity. On the one hand, mythical space is its own literal content: the proposed new order, and the becoming of that new relation of organisation. While on the other hand, this new order symbolises the very principle of spatiality and structurality. The critical effects of the mythical space on the dominant structural space will thus increase the latter's destructuration. Laclau writes further:

The mythical space will appear as pure positivity and spatiality, and to this end it will present that to which it is opposed as a non-space, a non-place where dislocations are added together. In order to conceive itself as a space – as the point of a fully realised objectivity – it will have to present those dislocations as equivalent, but as systematic, nonetheless (Ibid.: 62).

However, as this systematic character cannot be that of an *absolute* structure, it must be referred back to a transcendent point, to an initial non-place of the dislocations that will be conceived as the source of the latter (i.e. the source of structurality and organisation). Accordingly, for Laclau, 'the transcendent *origin* of the structural dislocations is opposed to the *objective* immanence of the mythical space' (Ibid). In that way, mythical space has a type of metaphorical quality, such that it implies both the intuition of fullness, a 'content' of the space, and something different from itself, an absence of content – a non-space.

This description of 'mythical space' can be recast in terms of what I refer to as the variable and emergent 'spaces' of P2P networks. I use this notion of variable space to encapsulate the space that P2P network instability opens up. P2P networks can be said to mobilise the peculiar absence/presence oscillation of 'mythical space' in the following way. On the one hand, there is an 'absence' of structure, a dislocation or decentralisation of the points of transmission on a network (a 'non-space'). While on the other hand, there is also a 'presence', an identification with an unachieved fullness, which is the space of the subject (the 'space' where the user 'controls' the arrangement of digital files on the P2P network). The significance of such a model is in its ability to formulate subtle shades of control and organisation within the network itself. P2P networks tend to blur the boundaries between subject and object and producer and consumer in such a way as to (re)organise those relations along a continuum of use, practice addition and transformation. A P2P networks



such as eDonkey can be seen as positioning the user or subject as simultaneously a receiver and a producer, in the sense that the object made available for sharing (i.e. a digital file) is not owned or controlled exclusively by anyone, and whose movement is determinable only to the extent that it is itself open to variability. That is to say, the object can 'move' in and between users without ever being in their full or final 'possession'. Rather than coarsely characterising the exchange of digital files as a 'weapon' against mainstream commercial culture (which feeds in to the RIAA's claims concerning the legality of P2P), this continuum depicts P2P sharing in terms of its variability – and hence inability – to coalesce into a unified mode of organisation that would have linear consequences.

Here we can therefore see the manner in which P2P establishes an unachieved or unachievable fullness that proliferates both as the 'space' and the 'non-space', in short, the 'mythical space' mobilised by different P2P networks. The 'space' that is made available by P2P is, in fact, a space that acts both to organise the exchange of digital files *and* to dislocate the process of organisation. This latter action is significant because it enables different modes of organisation [of digital files] to persist. In other words, it is a 'space' wherein cultural objects such as music files can potentially reshape and transform themselves and their relation to subjects (including those categories that extend meaning to the role of the subject as that of a 'consumer' or 'receiver' of cultural objects), but which is, nevertheless, *incomplete* in the sense that it is never its own actual content.

And this is where the notion of 'mythical space' transpires as a condition of possibility, precisely because it enables us to *think* new practices, proposals and modes of organisation in the service of new cultures of democratic possibility. For if there is no possibility that things could be different – or, in the case of P2P, that such differences are intricately bound up in the variable nature of exchanges over the Internet, and that these differences need to be extended as a matter of 'possibility' – then one is not going to question the 'established' and 'legitimised' order of things or to envision organisation in other ways. From new links and new networks to new users and new uses (exemplified, for instance, in the difference between the eDonkey community and the anonymising Blubster network), the emergence of other modes of organisation operate as the 'condition' for the mobilisation new ways of understanding and thinking about the nonlinear dynamics of 'networked' relations. This, in turn, raises a number of issues concerning the ethico-political potential of P2P networks, including their capacity to initiate the

conditions that sustain new modes of organisation as networks of 'possibility'. And it is these that I want to focus on next.

#### **5.4 THE 'RISK' AND THE 'CHANCE' OF P2P FILE SHARING.**

The ethico-political potential of uneven and nonlinear network processes portend to what I consider is the 'risk' and the 'chance' of P2P. The 'risk', as I see it, is that of descending into a vacuum where P2P sharing become polarised around the legal/illegal and legitimate/piracy binaries. The consequence of this polarisation of thinking for P2P sharing is that it becomes absorbed within a kind of 'authentic discourse' that would rationalise the possibilities of P2P in accordance with 'what is legitimate' or 'what the market determines'. The advent of the Napster file sharing phenomenon arguably revolutionised the way in which music could be organised and distributed over the Internet, introducing a new way of acquiring, collecting and listening to music. But despite the expansion of newer, decentralised P2P sharing networks, the downfall of Napster and its subsequent re-emergence as a 'legitimate' (i.e. paid for) downloading service, together with the movement of P2P networks like Kazaa and iMesh towards selected commercial ventures,<sup>10</sup> raises further questions concerning the ability of new media technologies to circumvent big business' powers of incorporation for any significant length of time (G. Hall, 2003).

Indeed, the success of Apples' iTunes Music Store in the US (and recently launched in Europe), in addition to the fact that a number of companies – ranging from Microsoft and AOL to HMV and Virgin – offer some form of commercial download service, suggests, perhaps, that those 'powers of incorporation' are beginning to hold sway. What is more, this is not only the case in respect of established music conglomerates, such as BMG, Universal and EMI, but for other, traditionally non-music affiliated corporations, who may now be at the vanguard of a new culture of 'legitimate' Internet music distribution. A short time ago Pepsi, the US soft drink distributor, launched a new drive in what some industry spokespeople have labelled 'cross-over branding'. Confined to America for the moment, Pepsi intend to give away 100 million free music downloads for Apple's iTunes website through tokens on the cans and bottles of the popular soft drink. Not to be outmanoeuvred, Coca Cola went on the immediate offensive and launched MyCokeMusic.com, a website that allows customers to download singles and albums from a catalogue of over 250,000 MP3s. The head of Coca Cola's download service, Raf McDonnell, claims that the site is not a reaction to Pepsi's

promotion, but more so an initiative based on Coca Cola's 'ongoing dialogue with its consumers' about ways to 'strengthen their relationship'. He explains:

Pepsi has seen music downloads are a great way of reaching what is known as the YAF market, which stands for Young Active Fun-seeking. It wants to strengthen its relationship with those individuals in their teens and twenties, and music downloading is a very good way of doing that. Obviously, Coca Cola is thinking along the same lines, like many other big brands.<sup>11</sup>

Certainly, 'big brands' such as Pepsi and Coca Cola have made huge inroads into the popular music genre, securing lucrative (both economically and commercially) sponsorship deals with, among others, Britney Spears and Beyonce. On top of this, the sideways integration into the music download sector communicates both a 'trustworthiness' and a constancy to those consumers who identify with and seek assurance from the strength of 'the brand' ('would you download from Coke?'). Brands like Pepsi and Coke already derive standing through their association with popular cultural icons, and so the transition towards music distribution may not in itself be a substantial one. In contrast, there has been a considerable measure of indolence on the part of what is, on the whole, a conservative music industry that has – up until now at least – appeared unreceptive to the view that music dissemination can no longer rely as a given on the earlier 'big pipe down' model. Further, while those established record labels' (represented by the RIAA) response to P2P sharing has seen the execution of an excess of protectionist policies, taking the form of copyright enforcement, theft of intellectual property and piracy lawsuits, corporations such as Coca Cola, Pepsi and Apple appear to be more concerned with deep-rooted capitalist principles, such as branding, opportunism, and exploiting new potentials/markets. As Marx noted in *Capital*, capitalism presents itself as a profusion of commodities whose origins are forgotten in the anticipation of projecting attention forward. And this logic cannot be separated from our questioning of those relations that endeavour to tie down, at every opportunity, what those 'projections' are and the 'spaces' within which they can be said and shown to operate.

Therefore, before we sound the death-knell of P2P sharing and its subsequent descent into commercial space, I want to draw attention to what I suggest is the 'chance' of P2P. In line with my earlier exposition, I see the 'chance' of P2P in terms of its potential to mobilise new modes of consumption and distribution, and



production and organisation, which raise new political questions regarding the stability of those relations. By enabling the ordinary, diffuse user to engage not only in the technical dynamics of the control and dissemination of digital files/content, but in the new structures of experience, communication and understanding that this may elicit, I argue that the extension of P2P sharing suggests rather more unpredictable relations of use/outcome than those cited by institutions like the RIAA. By thinking about P2P networks in terms of variable spaces of organisation that evoke differential outcomes and relations a much more radical proposition emerges. This is the proposition that P2P is not one 'thing' (illegal or theft, free and uncontrolled), but rather remains an incomplete and emergent paradigm. Just as Apple's word on music downloading is not absolute (despite their extensive iPod marketing campaign) and the RIAA's actions against file sharers is not the institutional norm, so eDonkey cannot be understood as the panacea to the marketisation and commercialisation of cultural production.

Thought about in this way, then, it is quite apparent that it is indeed the incomplete and variable nature of P2P sharing that underlines its most radical potential. This potential is twofold. First, it foregrounds the constitutive 'lack' of P2P, showing us that its variable nature thwarts any strategic bias for 'totalisation' within some finite language or discourse. Thus, against attempts to ground P2P by recourse to strategies of totalisation (such as the RIAA's strategy of defining P2P networks as supporting copyright infringement) the outlined way of thinking about P2P enables us to focus on and make visible its multiplicity of infrastructures. This entails not only the different networks and different uses/outcomes of P2P, but also the diverse relations and modes of organisation and understanding they may mobilise. And second, this then allows us to see the singularity of P2P not as a fully constituted practice ('one thing', as I suggested earlier), but rather as an emergent socio-technical form that continually negotiates the diffractions and variables that underpin the dynamics of 'sharing' in networks. While not specifically referring to the Internet or P2P sharing, I think the following quote from Derrida encapsulates a lot of what I am suggesting here. He writes that:

. . . it is a [technological] network without unity or homogeneity, without coherence. It is a sharing . . . I prefer the word "sharing": it both says what is possible up to a point to have in common, and it takes dissociations, singularities, diffractions, the fact that several people or groups can, in

places, cities or non-cities, have access to the same programs – it takes all of this into account (Derrida, 2002: 66).

What I think this suggests in relation to P2P networks is that the dynamic of sharing is, above all, an unpredictable process. Because a P2P network like eDonkey is compositionally 'decentred' – comprising no single territory, community or server – this then renders any 'top down' or 'imposed' governability of the network more problematic. Thus, the relations and socialities that may take hold will have necessarily heterogeneous and so fractional outcomes.

#### **5.4.1 Dynamics of 'sharing'.**

One illustration of this more 'unpredictable' and 'variable' relation of P2P sharing can be seen in the 'Outragedmoderates' project ([www.outragedmoderates.org](http://www.outragedmoderates.org)). While legislators in the US are working to outlaw P2P networks, the Outragedmoderates project is turning P2P sharing in new directions. The project doesn't offer copyright music or videos for download. Instead it has aggregated more than 600 government and court documents to make them available for download through the BitTorrent, LimeWire and Soulseek P2P networks in the interest of expanding access to crucial information on the workings of the US government. The documents include such items as recent torture memos related to the Abu Ghraib prison scandal; a Senate Intelligence Committee report on what the US administration knew before it invaded Iraq in 2003; a map of Iraqi oil fields, pipelines and refineries, and a document called "Foreign Suitors for Iraqi Oilfield Contracts" dated March 2001. According to the Outragedmoderates website, more than three million pages of government documents have been downloaded via P2P since the site was launched in 2004. Although all of this information and data is available elsewhere, it is usually buried deep in government and court websites or strewn across the sites of various government watchdog groups and media outlets that are often only accessed by political journalists and civil servants.

Whilst the Outragedmoderates project is not intended to make a specific statement by using P2P networks (it is not about railing against or stealing from big media), its utilisation of such networks to organise and make available different kinds of content can, I think, be said to challenge the customary government and entertainment industry arguments that P2P sharing has no value, apart from stealing copyright works, and therefore should be outlawed. In this case, the utility

of P2P networks can be said to contribute to the mobilisation of a form of 'public' knowledge, making it easier for individuals to acquire specific kinds of content for specific purposes and to share it with others. To this end, the application of P2P networks as more avowedly 'public' facilities has been pursued by a number of similar projects, including the FreeNet Project (<http://freenet.sourceforge.net/>) as well as Torrentocracy (<http://torrentocracy.com/>). These projects enable users or peers to share materials such as documents, photographs, videos of speeches, conferences and interviews and television broadcasts by syndicating links to news and the content of news-like sites, including major news sites like Wired, news-oriented community sites like Slashdot, and personal weblogs. The potential of these P2P projects does not reside specifically in their capacity to provide 'counter' information or to promote an 'alternative' form of media (although they clearly do present such possibilities). Rather, it is to make available new ways of receiving and circulating different kinds of content. This can in turn be linked to what I think is a more radical proposition for P2P networks, which is their potential to generate new patterns of knowledge acquisition, distribution and understanding that raise new political questions concerning the authority of institutional (in particular mainstream broadcast and print media) rituals, including selection processes, editorial decisions, presentation and so on.

Rather than becoming polarised around debates that want to break P2P down into clear, definable arguments concerning legality and illegality or permission and piracy, what I think these cases provide is a different spin on the organisation and consumption of 'content' over the Internet. Rather than acquiring documents, texts and materials through the filter of a news article, for example, the introduction of a P2P methodology suggests a different, more variable context of attaining particular forms of content. P2P networks encourage different contexts of relationships between individuals – exchange, viral communications and collaboration. The recording companies, for instance, lament the fact that P2P networks facilitate exchange between individuals: the searchability of the network and diffuse relationships undermine control over exchanges between equals (i.e. as 'consumers'). Beyond the entertainment area, in the case of Outragedmoderates.org individuals can increasingly share critical information with each other in communications networks that enable them not only to consume information in the precise quantities and at the time they want, but to produce content in new and innovative ways. For example, Journalists and media critics may use Outragedmoderates to enrich their documentary and commentary



activities. Educators and academics can also use P2P technology to expand their ability to catalogue and make available informative materials for different purposes. And activists may utilise the same technology in the service of a particular political point, perhaps even reworking certain types of content like video footage and disseminating this for political effect (similar to culture jamming and subvertising). In addition, because this new context 'functions' according to different protocols – i.e. process rather than production; clients more than consumers; the anomaly of 'use' as opposed to the conduction of meaning – this then introduces an alterity in the locus of control itself. One consequence of this 'variation' in the locale of control is that it problematises institutional (in this instance media and organisations of the state) authority and legitimacy by undermining the way in which we (as users, peers or clients) acquire, understand, organise and exploit different types of content. This can be seen as perhaps even more pronounced in relation to another mode of 'sharing' that I want to talk about next – the electronic archive.

#### **5.4.2 The e-archive.**

Having discussed what I think are the reasons for extending P2P sharing in new and different ways, here I want to look another way in which the dynamic of sharing may impress on practices of exchange and organisation. One application that builds on the 'open' and 'sharing' paradigms of P2P is the electronic archive, or e-archive for short. A particular area that I want to focus on is that of the role of the e-archive in the collection and dissemination of academic literature.<sup>12</sup> However, an important distinction needs to be made here between e-print archives and P2P. In the main, P2P sharing is not really the way it works in academia. One reason for this is because, unlike say music or film, you require greater information than the file name (i.e. the artist or producer or writer) in order to decide whether to download a paper or article. Rather, one can point towards the development of e-print archives where people (generally, though not exclusively, academics) post articles and other documents they have written that pertain to the particular 'archive' in question. A few examples are the History and Theory of Psychology E-Print Archive (HTP Prints) at <<http://httpprints.yorku.ca/>>, Steve Harnad's 'CogPrints' (cognitive science) at <<http://cogprints.ecs.soton.ac.uk/>>, and the DSpace archive or 'digital institutional repository' at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology <<http://dspace.org>>. This last illustration is an open source software system that captures, stores, indexes, preserves and redistributes the intellectual output of a university's research faculty in digital formats. As an open source system, DSpace

is freely available to any research institution to customise and expand according to the requirements of any institution or specific departments.

According to the HTP Prints systems' literature, an e-print archive can be used by academics and scholars to disseminate their work quickly and widely, supplementing traditional mechanisms for the circulation of printed paper documents in academic journals (<http://httpprints.yorku.ca/faq.html>). In view of the fact that the e-archive system enables far greater and more rapid transmission of scholarly documents and research materials than traditional academic journals (which suffer both from often very low readership and poor accessibility: literally, very few book stores stock academic titles, apart from comprehensive course guides or 'readers'), this then clearly raises additional questions concerning the way in which scholastic research is conceived, acquired, communicated, exchanged, organised and understood. This is particularly relevant to the way in which the e-archive system may make new levels of cooperation and connection possible both in the domain of sharing as well as in the 'space' of discovery. For instance, academics and students – in particular postgraduate students – working in more specific research areas like the humanities, where funding and/or literature may not be as easily acquired or communicated as other disciplines like science (Tenopir and King, 2000), can organise and communicate research articles/essays and their ideas to interested others in additional ways and through untraditional processes. This in turn suggests the potential for a redrawing of research fields, opening out other areas of academic interest that, through the e-archive system, can communicate both the strength and scope of research material available and its relevance for other networks of academics/students.

In his research on academic e-print archives, Gary Hall calls attention to the ensuing debates surrounding alternative forms of academic publishing as one response to the current political and economic situation, including the impact of policy decisions on the nature and character of the academy and higher education more generally (G. Hall, 2003). In an article for the *Culture Machine* e-journal (<http://culturemachine.tees.ac.uk/>) he notes how, particularly in the UK, an expansion of student numbers has gone hand in glove with a decline in the number of books and journals per student that are provided by university libraries. In addition, cuts in funding, driven by the attempts of consecutive governments to compete in the global market place by reducing the state budget deficit through cutbacks in public expenditure, have fashioned a situation wherein it is

progressively more difficult for libraries to budget for books, and for students to be able to purchase them. This situation is clearly antithetical to any kind of scholarly research development since, alongside the reality of today's academic being evermore dependent on the publication of their work, both institutions and students are finding it progressively more difficult to purchase texts. As a consequence, Hall concludes, 'the traditional market for the academic monograph has been substantially eroded' (Ibid.).

In the UK, one rejoinder to this situation has been the publication of supplementary journals in specific subject areas. In cultural studies alone, one publisher – Sage – has launched several new titles, including *The International Journal of Cultural Studies*, *The European Journal of Cultural Studies* and *The Journal of Visual Culture*, for the purpose of meeting the demand from academics for greater 'research impact'. However, as Hall reminds us, it is not simply a question of producing ever more journals in order to offset those demands. Rightly, in my view, he points out that . . .

a shortage of funds produced by decreasing budgets and the rapidly increasing costs of medical, scientific and technical journals has meant that many university libraries are unable to sustain their current holdings, never mind expand the number of periodicals they take . . . Even if academics do manage to get published in one of these organs, the chances of anyone having access to their work, let alone actually reading it, are getting slimmer all the time. (As an academic, one regularly hears rumours that the average readership for a journal is . . . somewhere between 3 and 7 readers) (Ibid.).

Considering that many academics want their work to be read by as many people as possible, with the net potential of having both an academic as well as a social impact, it is not unreasonable to conceive of them making their work available to anyone who might assist in this. Indeed, as e-archive adherent Steve Harnad has suggested, this is generally how academia works: the more scholarly work is read, cited and built upon by other researchers, the more possibilities may open for academic employment, career progression, promotions and the awarding of research bursaries (Harnad, 2001).<sup>13</sup> Accordingly, what may render e-print archiving worthy of note to many academics is that, because it enables work to be both freely available and easily accessible (in contrast to the high cost of its publication in material form), it does make reaching a wide readership a distinct



possibility. Moreover, as Hall notes, this may mean that academics no longer have to struggle over the 'saleability' of their research and the demands of academe marketing procedure: the e-print archiving system could make their text available to potentially any researcher, scholar or student who wants it, free of charge – they simply download the file from the archive (G. Hall, 2003).

#### **5.4.3 The DSpace project.**

One relatively conventional model for this system of e-archiving is the open source DSpace project. DSpace is an attempt to address a problem that Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) faculty has been expressing to the MIT libraries for the past few years. As faculty and other researchers develop research materials and scholarly publications in increasingly complex digital formats, there is a need to collect, preserve, index and catalogue them. The DSpace system was designed to facilitate this. Effectively, it provides a way to manage the myriad research material and publications output of an institution or department in a professionally maintained repository to give them greater visibility and access over time (<http://dspace.org>).

At MIT, the original aim of DSpace was to capture, index, manage and distribute the faculty's intellectual output in digital formats: research papers, other documents, datasets, images, audio/visual material, databases, or any other format deemed important (<http://dspace.org/introduction/index.html>). However, because DSpace was developed as an open source application or tool that could be expanded and improved by those taking up the system, exactly how it is used, for what sort of digital material, by whom, for how long, and so on, are policy issues that are decided by each organisation that adopts the it. The idea behind this being that, as open source software, DSpace has an improved chance of becoming a valuable tool, perhaps even a better system, if more institutions get involved in using it, supporting it, improving it, and working collaboratively to develop a model for keeping it over time.

Of course, DSpace isn't P2P in the same way as Kazaa, Overnet and eDonkey et al. And it would be inaccurate to view it in the same light as these systems. The DSpace system or 'digital repository' is centrally arranged around specific communities that may have distinct informational requirements. These 'communities' may take the form of university departments, faculties, research

centres and schools, etc, who utilise the system in order to manage the submission process themselves, i.e. each 'community' provides its own criteria for the ways in which material is collected and distributed. The obstacle that confronted central server systems like Napster, however, need not necessarily apply to DSpace. Whereas Napster was sued by the recording industry for infringement of copyright, this may not actually be a problem for archiving systems: academics are not really concerned about profiting from their publications directly (i.e. fiscally) in the same way that a musician or record company generates capital according to the turnover from record sales (Harnad, 2001). In this way, issues concerning copyright need not be an obstacle for the archiving of academic texts.<sup>14</sup>

However, I would further suggest that the idea of e-archiving is about developing the technological – and perhaps even philosophical – ideas behind P2P sharing. It is about generating new domains or 'spaces' where the ideas of sharing and of contribution can have a purchase outside the long-established frameworks of organisational norms. Similarly, digital repositories of publishing material may make scholastic research more generally apparent, and so may prove to be a more uncomplicated and conceivably more accessible way to promote the research of a given 'community' and widen its impact. Indeed, this thread is picked up on by Mackenzie Smith, project director at MIT libraries. Drawing attention in particular to the utility of DSpace for making available documents which tend not to be formally published, such as working papers, technical reports and conference proceedings, she writes:

DSpace is proving to be a valuable tool [at MIT libraries] to capture and manage this type of material, thus solving a problem for the departments, research labs and centres that produce them, and making the research work of the institution more generally visible. This is perceived as a straightforward way to promote the research of a given community and to broaden its impact.<sup>15</sup>

The aim of DSpace at MIT, and at an increasing number of other institutions (including Cambridge, Edinburgh and Glasgow universities in the UK, as well as similar repository at Southampton University), to make research material in various forms widely available may prove to be quite achievable. However, finding an incentive for university faculties and departments to participate and working with publishers to make certain that these efforts continue to be possible (for example,

will posting on the archive affect subsequent attempts to publish in a journal?) and, hopefully, become easier, is a ongoing process that has only really just begun to be explored.<sup>16</sup> For example, in his overview of open archives, Stephen Pinfield comments that

. . . self-archiving may require a cultural change amongst researchers that can only be achieved through significant advocacy activity. . . Any advocacy activity needs to try a number of different approaches and needs to be sensitive to discipline-specific issues. The incentives for researchers to self-archive need to be clearly identified.<sup>17</sup>

Certainly, having a platform available with which to experiment and to shape different archiving spaces at research institutions cannot help but to strengthen distinctive progress in research activity, not least because digital archives offer benefits over and above those of traditional modes of publishing and consumption, such as wider access, ability to revise and update content on a regular basis, easy capacity for browsing and searching of subject-specific material, to name a few. Similarly, I think more institutions getting involved in comparable processes are likely to increase the possibility of achieving the kind of change that could see e-print archiving techniques becoming customary practice in certain fields. This is particularly the case, as I suggested earlier, for specific subject areas in the Humanities, which today appear to be less economically viable than the so-called STM fields (science, technology and medicine), whose market for 'prestigious' scholarly journals is often infinitely more attractive to large commercial publishers (Tenopir and King, 2000). Moreover, because e-print archive systems can be organised around particular 'communities of users', including university departments, research centres and even reading groups, I think one potentially more radical consequence of this could well be a redrawing of the configurations of the 'institution' and thus of knowledge creation itself.

And this is where I think parallels can be drawn between open-archive initiatives and P2P sharing techniques. Similar to P2P, initiatives in digital, e-archiving can be said to raise new questions about the 'conventional' and the 'standard' ways of *doing things*, particularly regarding the efficacy of established frameworks to realise the research potential of emergent areas of academic enquiry. This in turn presents what I believe are new ways of thinking about knowledge creation, acquisition, communication and organisation, as these processes – in digital form –



comprise new modes of access, use, selection, searching and links being forged between users, keeping the possibilities of 'sharing' at once 'open' and 'unrealisable'. Owing to the 'community' dynamic of P2P sharing, this possibility entails, paradoxically, both an intricate and a loose system of trust, wherein each connection made between the diffusion of users extends the reputation of that network – a kind of 'strength in numbers' philosophy. This is why I have further argued that the e-archive system, particularly in the domain of academia, combines the 'open' and 'sharing' paradigms of P2P with what I would call a type of emergent network of organisation. Such networks enable people to establish a trusted community of users, sharing files, information, material and even research with an assemblage of their contemporaries while simultaneously keeping the network organised around those individuals whose goal is to keep it open, flourishing and thus, in some permanent way, 'unrealisable'.

And this is, I would suggest, both the radical democratic condition and possibility of 'sharing' techniques. As I elaborated on in my second chapter, the 'resistance to realisation' serves as a cornerstone for the mobilisation of new [radical democratic] possibilities. Above all, the practice of sharing entails the stimulus of new spaces of organisation, interaction, exchange and investiture which together disrupt established relations and present us with alternatives. Not alternatives in the shape of a comprehensive rejoinder as to *what is to be done*; but, more accurately, alternatives in the form of *other* ways of doing things. These encompass *other* ways of questioning the producer-consumer relationship; *other* ways of experimenting with different types of communities; *other* ways of communicating and organising material, information, content and knowledge in the service of different objectives. In short, other ways of 'thinking' and 'doing'. Accordingly, by remaking and expanding these particular spaces, these plateaus of organisation, the chance to push our democratic and political imaginaries in many directions is strengthened.

## 5.5 CONCLUSIONS.

My concern in this chapter has been to consider P2P sharing from the point of view of its radical democratic potential. This entails, in particular, investigating the means by which P2P sharing can be extended and thought about in new and different ways. In order not to detract from the possibilities of P2P sharing, I argued that it was vital we look towards developing an outline for understanding, as well as

for generating, ideas and activities surrounding the practice of sharing which may mobilise new 'democratic imaginaries'. The composition of P2P sharing as a variable and emergent mode of organisation was posed as a way of broaching its democratic potential. This potential was considered in a number of ways.

First, the way in which P2P sharing makes possible new modes of distribution, communication and organisation was weighed up against more conventional modes. It was argued that P2P sharing introduces into the locus of the exchange of cultural objects such as music a way of subverting the traditional producer-consumer relationship. By enabling the ordinary diffuse user to participate in the dissemination of cultural objects the role and institutional authority of organisations like the RIAA and MPAA is undermined. This has led, on one level, to the burgeoning of new P2P networks that offer different facilities: community sharing, multiple file transfers, anonymous downloading and so on. But it has also set in motion a swathe of legal proceedings against individual file sharers – as the record industry seeks to assert its intellectual property rights – which in turn has given rise to so-called 'legitimate' or 'paid for' download sites such as Apple's iTunes and Napster.com.

However, to challenge the idea that P2P sharing merely constitutes a form of copyright theft, as the institutional refrain dictates, I proposed the requirement to see P2P in a different way. Rather than viewing P2P as a direct challenge to bodies like the RIAA or as some counter-intuitive assault on the record industry, I suggested a more radical proposition. I argued that we need to look towards developing new theories of P2P that can take us beyond the polemical positions of piracy/legitimate and alternative/mainstream. I put forward Ernesto Laclau's description of 'mythical space' as a 'dislocated terrain of representation' and recast it in a way that allowed me to account for the manner in which P2P sharing mobilises new structures of experience and organisation. While Laclau uses the notion of mythical space to depict the differentiated nature of identities that entail the 'impossibility of civil society', I showed how mythical space can function to depict the multiple dislocations and variability of P2P sharing. P2P sharing functions in a way that mobilises emergent (i.e. not fully formed) 'spaces' that act both to organise the exchange of different kinds of content *and* to dislocate the process of organisation. This way of thinking about P2P sharing opens up other potential applications of P2P in the service of different ends.

The second potential of P2P sharing was therefore identified in line with its multiple applications. One appliance that was considered was that of the electronic archive or 'e-archive'. I argued that e-archives offer a way of introducing the *potential* of sharing techniques into new domains. One particular domain that was focussed upon was that of academia. I looked towards the potential of sharing techniques in academia to open up new patterns of collection and communication, and exchange and practice, of research material and academic literature. Through the relevant literature in this area, and with reference to a number of examples of e-archive systems, I defended the claim that e-archives constitute an effective means to communicate and exchange very specific kinds of academic materials. Materials including essays, articles, research notes and annotations and contemporaneous subject reports, all of which can be collated, stored and distributed digitally between 'peers' (academics, students and so on). However, I do not posit this as an absolute alternative to, or the supplanting of, the publication of material journals. On the other hand, following Hall (2003) I do think that it raises further questions concerning both institutional authority and publication policies by redrawing our relationship to the politics of knowledge acquisition and dissemination, including how it is practised and understood. In addition, because participants can use a peer-based network to better communicate and exchange content with each other, this may prove invaluable to the development of scholarly research – particularly in areas like the humanities – as well as strengthening the possibilities of the network itself.

A broader conclusion regarding the above cases is that of their potential to mobilise new patterns of distribution, exchange and communication whereby 'other' configurations of social interaction and democratic organisation can emerge. These other configurations present us with 'alternatives' of a different kind. These 'alternatives' mobilise what I have suggested are radical democratic conditions, which bring to the fore other ways of thinking, doing and acting. P2P sharing extends to 'ordinary users' ('peers') the capacities to sample, modify, redirect and repurpose the social life of different kinds of content: from cultural forms like music to academic literature, and from 'alternative' news sources to knowledge resources or 'archives'. Moreover, because peer-based sharing is affirmatively powered by ordinary users, all who participate have an interest in making sure that the network/archive is open to extension and variation, since the more users there are the more content is made available and the more that content is open to different intentions. And it is precisely because these possibilities transpire, and that they



can be thought, questioned and communicated in alternative ways, that they have a purchase on the direction of new means of democratic organisation.

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<sup>1</sup> 'How Copyright Changed Hip Hop: an Interview with Public Enemy's Chuck D and Hank Shocklee', *Stayfree Magazine*, 07/06/2004 ([www.stayfreemagazine.org/archives/20/public\\_enemy.html](http://www.stayfreemagazine.org/archives/20/public_enemy.html)).

<sup>2</sup> See also, Robin Hamman, 'The History of the Internet, WWW, IRC, and MUDs' ([www.socio.demon.co.uk/history.html](http://www.socio.demon.co.uk/history.html)). Last accessed 22/06/2004.

<sup>3</sup> The 'ARPA' part is an acronym for Advanced Research Projects Administration, and the body funding the research was the DOD, or the Department of Defence. Though the ARPAnet didn't go on its first excursion down the information highway as the information highway until 1969, its initial venture had occurred with Sputnik in 1957, with the affectionate term 'online' being coined in 1962. It wasn't until 1969, after the system had been set up on four computers (three in California and one in Utah), that the first message was sent by one Charlie Kline at UCLA. He managed to crash the entire system with the letter 'G' of 'LOGIN'.

<sup>4</sup> Napster was not strictly P2P as it used a central server to route traffic. Napster disappeared in its original incarnation in 2001. Roxio, the company that bought the Napster name and technology patents for \$5 million in November 2002, has released a new version 2.0 (<http://www.napster.co.uk/>). Complete with its infamous feline ('fat cats') logo, the big difference with the new Napster is that the users pay. There are two revenue streams. Either 99 cents (or 99p in the UK) a track or \$9.95 (£9.95) for a monthly subscription (see, 'Can the New Napster Cut It?', *Guardian New Media*: 20/10/2003).

<sup>5</sup> See, 'The Rise and Fall of Napster' ([www.bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2/A741089](http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2/A741089)).

<sup>6</sup> Kazaa's standing as a P2P network is open to contention. On the one hand, it extends to users the possibility to access a distributed network, which then enables users to connect to further networks. On the other, in an effort to counter the RIAA's contention that such networks are themselves illegal (given that they facilitate copyright infringed file transfers) Kazaa licensed their technology and created a proprietary file sharing system. They also inserted advertising into their programs and constantly updated their software so that clones (copies) would not be compatible with their networks. In order to prevent software clones from operating on their network, and to preserve advertising revenue, Kazaa makes users verify their authenticity with a central server before connecting to the distributed network. This, in effect, turns Kazaa into a centralised network, making it just as vulnerable to the legal challenges that brought down the first Napster service.

<sup>7</sup> Electronic Frontier Foundation, 'What Peer-to-Peer Developers Need to Know about Copyright Law' ([http://www.eff.org/IP/P2P/p2p\\_copyright\\_wp.php](http://www.eff.org/IP/P2P/p2p_copyright_wp.php)).

<sup>8</sup> This actually adheres to many of the principles of the GNU General Public License and the Free Software Movement, including the users' freedom to run, copy, distribute, study, change and develop the software or program (<http://www.gnu.org/copyleft/gpl.html>).

<sup>9</sup> 'Sound of the Underground', *Guardian Online magazine*: 03/07/2003.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, 'Ice T offers album for sale to Kazaa users', 10/04/2003 ([www.gnutellaneews.com/article/6441](http://www.gnutellaneews.com/article/6441)). Also, 'Grammy winner Steve Winwood enters deal with 'Access Hollywood' and file-swapping service Kazaa', *CNN Money*, 29/06/2004 ([http://money.cnn.com/2004/06/29/news/newsmakers/winwood\\_download.reut/](http://money.cnn.com/2004/06/29/news/newsmakers/winwood_download.reut/)). And, 'iMesh Strikes a deal with the RIAA', *Slyck News*, 20/7/2004 (<http://www.slyck.com/news.php?story=529>).

<sup>11</sup> 'Brand New Music', *Media Guardian*, 26/01/2004.

<sup>12</sup> See, John MacColl (March, 2002): "'Archive' in the context of the 'open archive' . . . has its own particular meaning. It may on the surface appear to be an oxymoron to talk of an 'open' archive. An open archive is not primarily concerned with the process of preservation, but rather with the process of deposit. Open archives are like pigeon-holes on the internet, into which researchers deposit copies of their latest publications. A machinery awaits these

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publications, which researchers need not know about, but which involves the campus library, database software and indexing and harvesting protocols, turning their deposited papers into a freely-shared corpus of research. This corpus can be traversed meaningfully by the use of searching tools, developed also by the Open Archives Initiative, to allow the searcher to specify a subject or an author or a title, or to confine their search only to those papers already accepted for publication in professional journals, or only to those papers which have appeared in a particular journals" ('Free Access to Research Publications? The Potential of the Open Archives Initiative':

<http://www.ed.ac.uk/iash/proceedings/maccoll/maccoll.html>).

<sup>13</sup> Steve Harnad (2001) 'For Whom the Gate Tolls? How and Why to Free the Refereed Research Literature Online through Author/Institution Self-Archiving, Now' ([www.ecs.soton.ac.uk/~harnad/Tp/resolution.htm](http://www.ecs.soton.ac.uk/~harnad/Tp/resolution.htm)).

<sup>14</sup> See, K. Patel, 2000, 'Team Finds Way Round Copyright', *The Times Higher Education Supplement*, February 12<sup>th</sup>. See also the [Harnad/Oppenheim preprint+corrigenda strategy](#).

<sup>15</sup> Mackenzie Smith, 'DSpace for E-Print Archives', *High Energy Physics Libraries Webzine*, issue 9, March 2004 (<http://library.cern.ch/HEPLW/9/papers/3/>).

<sup>16</sup> For example, the recent test project between Google and MIT to provide a way to search institutions' collections of scholarly research through Google's [advance-search page](#) is already well underway ('Google Teams Up with 17 Universities to Test Searches of Scholarly materials', *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 2004: <http://chronicle.com/free/2004/04/2004040901n.htm>).

<sup>17</sup> Steven Pinfield, 'Open Archives and UK Institutions: An Overview', *D-Lib Magazine*, March 2003: <http://www.dlib.org/dlib/march03/pinfield/03pinfield.html#8>.



## CHAPTER 6.

### NEW 'NETWORKS OF DEMOCRATIC POSSIBILITY': OPEN PUBLISHING IN ORGANISED NETWORKS.

In this chapter I build on the arguments developed in chapters four and five, about the organisation of network forms of politics, in order to outline a radical democratic response to new modes of communicative exchange and interaction. Here I attempt to develop a more robust account of politics in networks by looking at a number of different forms of democratic organisation. The particular aspect of networked politics that I want to talk about is the emergent socio-technical forms of open publishing networks. I consider open publishing networks in terms of their potential to mediate – and in some ways moderate – communication between individuals across the 'uneven' and 'nonlinear' situations of networks. I look at three distinct dynamics of open publishing networks, the Fibreculture (<http://www.fibreculture.org/>) listserve, the Interactivist network ([www.interactivist.net](http://www.interactivist.net)) and the Indymedia Network (<http://www.indymedia.org>), and show how they comprise an 'active participation' (Meikle, 2002) model that enables individuals and groups to mobilise new forms of communication and organisation, and processes of knowledge creation and circulation. I argue that these networks undermine the conventional divide between professional producers and situated audience, contributing to new kinds of relations and conditions within which different modes of democratic organisation may emerge.

Conventionally, open publishing may suggest an opening out of perspectives and opinion formation by enabling formerly excluded knowledge and dialogue (that is, rarely catered for in the mainstream media) into the outline of a public sphere, however reconfigured. Thus, Jodi Dean has spoken about the ways in which listserves and blogging may promote interactive dialogues that afford contexts for differential public spheres (Dean, 2001). And in chapter three I drew attention to Khan and Kellner's account of the Internet subcultures of the anti-globalisation movement (from the initiatives of the Zapatistas to the McSpotlight website) as forms of oppositional 'technopolitics' that can produce new public spheres of opinion formation, community and political action – the Internet as a vehicle for political activism, as they have put it (Khan and Kellner, 2004, 2005). However, in what is a potentially more radical gesture, I further argue that open publishing raises new political questions and understandings about how information and

knowledge is stored, accessed, regulated and communicated. This 'understanding' is being extended and organised through new interrelationships of open software applications, protocols and expressive practices putting a more individual, granular perspective on creating and accessing, and acquiring and generating information. For example, the use of open publishing platforms such as the Indymedia network calls attention to the continuities that attend new kinds of networked exchanges and decentred interactivity. The model of open publishing extended by the Indymedia network is not restricted to a technical or professional elite: easy-to-use software (such as 'paste and post' newswires) enables individuals with limited practical computer experience to publish ideas, articles, content, engage in discussion and build online directories or archives of resources. In this way, I suggest that open publishing techniques point towards a reconfiguration of established notions of a public sphere built around the 'organising centres' of particular institutions (such as the mainstream media) and the relationship of individuals and subjects to those institutions. In the context of networked ICTs like the Internet, the facility of such 'centres' to extend meaning, define relationships and to 'guide the public direction of society' (Corner, 1995) is rendered more problematic. The figuring of communities, socialities and subjectivities in the 'space' of nonlinear networks can be said to undermine the conventional borders between public and private, democracy and citizenship, politics and consumption, bringing forth new interpretations and situations of politics and democracy.

These new interpretations of politics and democracy find their *form* in the shape of 'networks of possibility'. Rather than the liberal notion of consensus through reasoned debate, open publishing points up the inherent 'problems' of consensus and stability through the continuities of *decentralised* dialogue and communication networks. Similar to the explanation of P2P sharing in my fifth chapter, the radical possibilities of open publishing can be understood through its capacity to 'organise' relations of communication and interaction across uneven and nonlinear networks. However, this is contingent on the 'non-closure' of the possibilities of open publishing and thus its potential for shaping new forms of 'electronically mediated discourse' (Poster, 2001b) and new configurations of 'democratic organisation'.

To meet this challenge I argue that open publishing should be seen in terms of its capacity to mobilise new spaces or 'plateaus of organisation' as specific kinds of 'organised networks'. The model of emergent plateaus of organisation that I describe provides a way to account for different forms of open publishing in

'agonistic' terms. The example of open publishing networks as plateaus of organisation provide a basis for an examination of the conditions of possibility for an agonistic democracy articulated in terms of networks. By continuing to negotiate the uneven and antagonistic conditions that comprise the spatio-temporal dimensions of networks, the plateaus of organisation suggest examples of temporary network stability in which the potential to define and mobilise new democratic imaginaries can be thought, practiced, questioned, recast and understood. They facilitate a means of identifying, accounting for and sustaining the uneven, differentiated and nonlinear terrain of networked socialities and politics as 'networks of possibility'. I therefore want to suggest that the most radical way to think about the potential of open publishing is precisely through this description of plateaus of organisation.

## 6.1 EXPLORATIONS OF NETWORK ARCHITECTURE.

In my third chapter I described how the Internet introduces a new level of complexity into communication practices, and how this in turn is contributing to the mobility of new practices of exchange and organisation which interweave and rearticulate existing relations between the local and the global, politics and citizenship and production and consumption. In particular, I used John Frow's (2001) claim that the networks of the Internet contribute to the 'formation of a culture without a centre' to argue that one of the most significant features of the Internet is its capacity to *decentralise* or *resignify* our understanding of contexts of 'organisation'. Beyond direct analogues to broadcasting (either through mail or telephone), the networked architecture of the Internet can be said to enable the creation of manifestly new kinds of media and modes of organisation at different levels of interaction – discussion boards, electronic archives, weblogs with feedback from readers, collaborative open source software development, audio and video conferences, online auctions, music file sharing, open hypertext systems, to name a few. However, these modes of organisation can at no time be described as fixed or permanent. Rather, I argued that they point towards a diversification and complexification of relations that has altered our perception of what it means to be a person interacting with other persons within networks.

The complexification of online or networked relations is not only giving shape to wholly progressive modes of organisation, however; they are also presenting us with new means of control and power that are antithetical to radical democratic



objectives. These require elaboration if we are to challenge their efficacy and offer more diverse 'alternatives' that would present 'networks of possibility' in a genuinely radical democratic manner.

### **6.1.1 *The internet as 'public commons?'***

Metaphorical 'walls' have also been going up around the networks of the Internet. These 'walls' are related, in many ways, to anxieties concerning the fear of surveillance, control and exclusion. Since September 11 2001 in particular, but also since March 11 2004 (when terrorist attacks struck Madrid), we are increasingly confronted with the reality of what some have described as a 'web of trust, sharing and interdependence' becoming a 'web of surveillance and segregation' (Lyon, 2003; Ball & Webster, 2004). After the events of March 11, Spanish voters sent each other text messages. Within a few hours several thousand of them met apparently spontaneously to protest against the official government information policy. This points to the very synergy made possible by the mobile web, while at the same time the collective fear of, say, virus attacks, privacy infringements, theft and pornography make the idea of a 'net of control' not only plausible but even desirable, at least from the viewpoint of some governments and pressure groups (Lessig, 1999, 2004).<sup>1</sup>

Adjoined to this anxiety of a 'net of control' is the concern related to the growing commercialisation of the Internet, and in particular the encroaching interests of traditional media and government who continue to exercise formidable power on the net. According to John Walker, media power centres are taking shape in the domains of the Internet that are leading to what he calls the 'digital imprimatur' – basically an official license to print, copy, reproduce, distribute and verify different kinds of content on the internet (Walker, 2003). This, he suggests, means the end of the Internet as we know it today, when Big Brother and big media put 'the Internet genie back in the bottle' through such protocols as Digital Rights Management (DRM) – a code of procedures and rules that can be encrypted in pre-installed computer software to administer anything from the material they download to how it can be paid for. Indeed, Walker argues that consolidation among Internet infrastructure companies and increased governmental surveillance of activities on the Internet is creating the potential for the imposition of 'points of control' onto the Internet. Such points of control can be used for whatever purpose those who put them in place wish to accomplish. One example concerns the issue of online

identity management. Two business based projects, the 'Passport' initiative that is part of Microsoft's .Net architecture and the Liberty Alliance, are concerted efforts to establish de-facto standards for personal online identity and information management. The primary intent of these two systems is to privatise users' personal information (such as website 'sign-in' credentials) and subsequently manage it in a way that affords them a share of every financial transaction a user makes. For instance, if a user makes an online purchase from a website participating in the .Net facility Microsoft earn a percentage of that transaction.<sup>2</sup> Walker argues that projects such as these can be viewed as attempts to 'reimpose a conventional producer/consumer information dissemination model on the Internet, restoring the central points of control which traditional media and governments see threatened by its advent' (Ibid.). Each of these projects can be justified on its own as solving clamant problems of the present-day Internet, and may be expected to be promoted or mandated under the terms of DRM and its implementation of intellectual property rights in computer hardware, software, and media (Ibid.). In fact, DRM deployment is presently underway. Current mass market multimedia players are beginning to support various schemes, as exemplified by Apple's iTunes Music Store, which is embedded with 'pay-per copy' and 'pay-per instance' encryption that restrict the files you download to your computer harddrive and cannot be shared.

According to Lawrence Lessig these current trends are pushing the Internet to become a closed, controlled, commercial space that most resembles a market place, dominated and driven by the corporatism and commercial 'creativity' of established content providers (2004). One consequence of this, he argues, is that we are less and less a 'free culture' and more and more a 'permission culture': 'Corporations threatened by the potential of the Internet to transform the way both commercial and non-commercial culture are made and shared have united to induce lawmakers to use the law [of copyright] to protect them' (Lessig, 2004: 9). In *Free Culture* Lessig writes insightfully about protecting the Internet as a 'public commons' – a resource shared by all that encourages productive collaboration between its users. To this end he offers a vision of the Internet where walls are kept to a minimum in order that 'innovative and creative behaviour has space to flourish' (Ibid.). His vision of a so-called 'innovation commons' is premised on an account of the Internet as a public resource that values cooperation, rather than being divided up among private owners and content administrators. In an interview

with Howard Rheingold, Lessig uses the analogy of a 'highway' to explain his notion of a Commons. He explains:

The highway is a commons. . . Everybody has access to the highway; nobody needs permission to use the highway system. . . The devices that you can use on the highway commons are regulated – you can't drive a tank, and if you have no lights, you'll be pulled over. . . Regulation of spectrum could move from the world of railroads, where central coordinators have to figure out who uses the track, to the world of highways, where smart devices figure out how to use their common resource as they actually want (in Rheingold, 2003: 153).

Lessig's account of a 'creative commons' in which regulative and distributive control is decentralised from an institutional hub to content creators themselves clearly explores the idea of a more diffuse relationship between producer and consumer while at the same time preserving the distinct spheres of private accumulation and public resource. To this end, it outlines a formal framework that endeavours to sustain the *value* of copyright as a marker of creative contribution and application. In addition, it sets out a formal way for authors and creators to exercise their rights more flexibly and cheaply in the public domain (i.e. the author or content creator holds their own copyright and suggests the terms of its application).

One example that can be seen as building on Lessig's 'commons' motif is the Creative Commons License (CCL) <http://creativecommons.org/> developed at MIT and Stanford University. The CCL is similar to that of the GNU project, which was adapted to build open source software applications such as the Linux operating system (see chapter three). Rather than the technique of software development, however, the CCL endeavours to outline a layer of *reasonable* copyright into the creation, distribution and consumption of cultural content. The notion of *reasonable* copyright is held as that which enables a range of content – from texts, articles and books to music, film and video – to be easily and reliably built upon (see Lessig, 2004: 83 – 94). A CCL constitutes a grant of 'reasonable freedom' to anyone who accesses the license. It works along some of the following lines: the content creator can choose a license that permits any use, so long as attribution is given; she can choose a license that permits only non-commercial use; she can choose a license that permits any use so long as the same freedoms are extended to other users (i.e. 'share and share alike'); or any use so long as no derivative use is made;



or any use at all within developing countries, such as educational use; and any sampling use, so long as full copies are not made.<sup>3</sup> For Lessig, the CCL articulates the notion of 'some rights reserved', rather than the traditional copyright model of 'all rights reserved' that is the mainstay proprietary model of much commercial content. However, the intention is not to surmount this latter model, but to 'complement it against a background of digital networked communication'. Accordingly, the Creative Commons aims to 'build a layer of content, governable by a layer of reasonable copyright law that others can build upon': voluntary choice of individuals and creators, rather than movie studios, record companies and publishing houses, will make this content available. According to Lessig, this model will in turn enable us to rebuild a public domain of creativity (Lessig, 2004: 283).

### **6.1.2 Questioning the Internet as 'commons'.**

Lessig's model of a Creative Commons raises important questions about Internet freedom and 'open' networks, including the freedoms to publish, share and create knowledge as a public resource. As such, it suggests a very compelling argument to countenance the idea that the creation and spread of knowledge is more efficiently generated and managed as a commercial resource with in-built patents and trademark customs that distinguish the potential of innovation and creativity in terms of exchange value and competitive advantage (Graham, 2000; Leadbeater, 2004). These new questions of knowledge creation can, I think, be connected to a broader debate about the ways in which networked interaction reconfigures the traditions through which information is acquired, communicated, exchanged and understood, and to related questions about the relationship between the public and private.

For instance, Lessig's Creative Commons reintroduces to current debates relating to copyright and intellectual property (Drahos and Braithwaite, 2003) the notion of knowledge as a 'public good' – that is, of the importance of a public domain to creativity and innovation as a common resource. And to this point Lessig establishes a model that tests the content industry's (represented by bodies like the RIAA and the MPAA) assertion that such practices as, for example, file sharing are illegal and constitute intellectual theft by configuring a system in which individuals – rather than accredited publishing houses and media corporations – attach to their own content a license that determines the scope of its reproduction and use.<sup>4</sup>

However, traditional institutional forms – in particular corporations and cultural industries – are increasingly appropriating many of the technics of network media. As I spoke about in my fifth chapter, it is possible for users to engage in an 'acceptable' P2P experience through Apple's iTunes store and Napster.com; and supporters of open source technology are just as apt to be IBM, Hewlet Packard (in conjunction with MIT) and Apple as they are to be free software advocates such as Richard Stallman and Lawrence Lessig (2002). Ultimately, these organisations are distinguished by their standing reserve of capital and their exploitation of labour power: they have the de facto financial resources to experiment with new technical means and the physical capacity to deploy a 'creative knowledge workforce' (Liu, 2004) in such pursuits. Such institutions are motivated by the need to organise social relations in the anticipation of maximising 'creativity' and regenerating the design of commodity forms that have long reached market saturation (such as Apple's iPod digital music player and the new – cheaper – iPod Mini and iPod Nano). Accordingly, one problem with the Creative Commons model is the extent to which it may be appropriated and adapted more straightforwardly by big business and traditional institutional forms than by individual and diverse content creators. Indeed, I think Lessig's following claim demonstrates this: 'The overall aim of Creative Commons is to build a movement of consumers and producers of content who in turn help build the public domain' (Lessig, 2004: 283 – 4).

Lessig's statement is quite clearly premised on an understanding of a public domain that achieves its full significance when considered in relation to the institutions and relations of liberal democracy and the ambitions of legitimacy within the prevailing doxa. It is, for practical purposes, a model that endeavours to channel creativity and innovation through conventional – if reconfigured – institutional forms and procedures. Consequently, Lessig's outline does not allow us the space necessary in which to 'creatively explore' alternative visions of a 'Commons' itself. The 'terms' of the Commons are thus more closely aligned with the extension of liberal configurations of democracy, and so fail to call attention to the need to rethink our understanding of terms like the citizen, politics, consumption and, indeed, democracy in relation to new and different kinds of organisation or 'spaces' immanent to the socio-technical forms of networks. I think McKenzie Wark puts the issue in a similar vein when he writes:

There may well be an emerging consensus as to how challenging it is to keep up with the 'speed' of the Internet. Why not take Deleuze's advice and

try to be 'untimely'? This need not always, as in [Paul] Virilio, mean . . . counterposing the slowness of reflection to the speed of the media . . . but [of] seeking another rhythm (Wark, 2001b: 1).

In chapter four I spoke of Deleuze's thinking on 'the untimely' through his account of 'rhizomic' network systems. Deleuze sees rhizomic networks as non-hierarchical structures that develop in an 'untimely' or 'differential' manner (Deleuze, 1986). I used the example of ECD to argue that this notion of 'the untimely' fulfils certain methodologies of tactical media ('constantly being on the move', never satisfied, always looking for new 'lines of becoming'), and that this can serve as a basis for producing new languages and 'affects' [of politics] that are not quantifiable within traditional, consensual modes of organisation (Colebrook, 2002: 64 – 6). For Deleuze being 'untimely' thus refers to disruption of the order and rationality of life's production through time, thereby enabling us to rethink time and to "give rise to something new" (ibid.). However, I also suggested that the notion of 'untimely' discounts the inherent 'unevenness' and 'nonlinearity' of networks which actually belie a 'smooth' rhizomic structure (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). Coming to terms with this unevenness, therefore, and the diverse modes of politics, resistance and organisation that it may occasion, is essential if we are both to sustain and mobilise new networks of democratic possibility.

This notion of the 'uneven' passage of networks introduces an important critique of the creative commons model that suggests a more radical proposition for defining new networks of democratic possibility. One problem with the commons motif is the extent to which it is grounded in a perception of networks and ICTs merely as enhancing existing institutions, relationships and modes of interaction and exchange – elevating the liberal-rationalist/humanist ideal of the growth of democracy primarily through the participation of individuals or groups (Levy, 2000, 2001). Thus, for example, Lessig's model of an information commons valorises a 'free culture' of 'open networks' as though these are *natural* conditions for the 'spread of human creativity, the inducement of innovation and the growth of networks' (in Rheingold, 2003: 154). But he subsequently fails to consider in detail both the complexities and contradictions that comprise the uneven spatio-temporal dimensions of networks and the ways in which their impact on traditional dynamics of human interaction and communication – the position of speech, the locus of reception, the genesis of production, etc – is affecting more 'variable' spaces that add a new layer of complexity to social relations. As such, the apriorism of 'free'



and 'open networks' is rendered in essentialist terms that serve to elide the more uneven passage of 'networks of possibility'.

### 6.1.3 Accommodating the 'unevenness' of networks.

The 'stabilising' capacity of the Commons motif offers an important and imaginative alternative to both corporate and government attempts to contain the Internet within existing frameworks and structures of organisation (legal, commercial, censorship, patterns of delivery, etc). One example I have used to illustrate this is the CCL, which can, I think, be viewed as a progressive patent formula that endeavours to reposition the technical conditions of digital writing (mobility, changeability, spatial continuity) within a legal outline that preserves the creative output of the content creator/author/producer. However, I have also argued that coming to terms with the antagonisms and contradictions peculiar to the varied and often incommensurate situations of informationality and networks is essential if we are to begin to *think*, and effectively critique, the diverse situations of an increasingly networked society. This is particularly important for the definition of new modes of politics and organisation. This antagonistic dimension is, though, overlooked in the creative commons model. Its clear separation between the public and private leads to the mistaken presumption that disagreements and antagonisms might be relegated to the private and an overlapping consensus established in the public domain, where creativity (whatever form it may take) will, of necessity, flourish. This is the implication of Lessig's 'Free Culture' thesis – i.e. that once a consensus is attained on the necessity of a *free* and *open* culture, and then subsequently enshrined in legal precedent, creativity and innovation is simply manifest as a logical outcome. The commons model, particularly in the way it is discussed in both Lessig and Rheingold, therefore posits the abstraction of antagonism as vital to the rational, regulated, though ultimately 'resolvable', extension of human innovation (Rheingold, 2003: 54 – 6).

What is required is, therefore, a more radical symposium. One that enables us to consider the uneven and nonlinear dynamics of networks' in relation to new modes of organisation, and the potential this may extend both for the creation of new cultures of radical politics and articulation and new understandings of social change. Similar to Robert Hassan, I think that . . .

Our new relationships with time and space and with technology demand that we develop new languages and new ways of understanding our place in this digital ecology. We need to create new narratives; new stories to both reacquaint us with our past and help make sense of our future. This will give us [*both*] new perspectives on what needs to be done *and new theorisations on their futurity* (Hassan, 2004: 136; emphasis added).

However, I would go further than Hassan does, and suggest that what is needed is a deeper understanding of how the uneven and antagonistic spatio-temporal dimensions of networks can be considered in relation to new kinds of what I spoke about in my third chapter as 'organised networks'. While the thesis of 'untimely' and 'rhizomic' networks emphasise the 'randomness and haphazard encounters that are key to network politics' (Notes from Nowhere, ed. 2003), it fails to develop this postulate beyond the simple valorisation of 'smooth networks' to consider both the way in which these activities constitute network formation and the differences and antagonisms that such formations may entail. In contrast, the organised network provides a way to meet this challenge. The organised network enables us to *accommodate* and to *think* the unevenness of networks relative to new occasions of organisation and formation; as networks of democratic possibility.

#### 6.1.4 Organised networks.

Ned Rossiter's (2004) description of 'organised networks' can be set apart from the non-hierarchical 'rhizomic' model since it actually reinforces notions of structure and arrangement, albeit of a different kind. For Rossiter, organised networks necessarily involve institutions, since institutions throughout history have served to organise social relations. For example, the institutions of liberal democracy are tied to the idea of citizenship, and citizenship is defined, as up to now it has been, by inscription within a place or territory that, in theory, fosters a shared 'identity' that motivates citizens to work together (Heater, 1999; Miller, 2000). But there are a number of characteristics that distinguish the organised network as an institution from its modern counterparts. On a general level there are differences along lines of horizontal vs. vertical, distributed vs. contained, decentralised vs. centralised, bureaucratic reason vs. database processing and so on, as I have explained both in this and in previous chapters. However, organised networks offer a new possibility – the 'possibility of creativity, invention and purpose that is not determined in the first instance by the institutions that emerged during the era of the modern state'

(Lovink and Rossiter, 2005). What marks the organised network apart as a new institution of possibility, Rossiter suggests, is that it endeavours to make a political, social and cultural difference *within* the socio-technical logic of networks. He explains:

Organised networks can be considered as a new institutional order whose political, economic and expressive capacities are shaped and governed by the metastability of the network system . . . In order for networks to organise mobile information a degree of hierarchisation, if not centralisation, is required. The point is that such organisation occurs within the media of communication (Rossiter, 2004).

Networks are defined – perhaps more than anything – by their ‘organisation’ of relations between agents, information, practices, interests and socio-technical systems. For instance, P2P networks organise the exchange of digital content between the diffuse peers of the Internet. An organised network can, according to Rossiter, show that it is possible to create new structures and cultures through the socio-technical formation of organised networks – distributive, non-linear, situated, and project-based – in order to institute ‘self-sustaining media-ecologies [that are] simply not on the map of established political and cultural institutions’ (ibid.). To meet this challenge, he suggests the need for networks to address situated problems if they are to develop into an organised form. This could include undertaking projects that require an organised response in order to realise activities such as conferences, publishing in different formats and platforms, educational workshops and training, new media art exhibitions, software development, online translation of foreign language books and so on. Networks like Nettime, the Sarai Media Centre and Fibreculture are presented by Rossiter as examples of organised networks that undertake such projects. These networks ‘address specific problems of sociality, politics, and intellectual transdisciplinarity’ filtered — at least in the case of Fibreculture — through a ‘void created by established institutions within the cultural industries and higher education sector’ (Ibid.).

However, my account of organised networks differs from Rossiter’s proposition of institutional forms. The explanation of organised networks as institutional forms is too restrictive in terms of their radical possibilities, implying something fixed and all-encompassing, and thus risks reconstituting the very thing that is in question (i.e. the inadequacies of established institutions in the face of the socio-technical forms



of networks). This is in line with the argument I put forward in my third chapter. There I described a more radical reading of organised networks as 'emergent plateaus of organisation'. The term 'plateau' depicts the emergent nature of organisation within the uneven and variable situations of networks. Plateaus of organisation institute uneven and variable networks with the capacity to address, represent and intervene in the complexity of social relations rather than to struggle towards synthesis or consensus, such maybe the impulse of the institutional refrain. In other words, the 'plateau of organisation' takes in both the varied situations of networks as well as the ways in which, as Donna Haraway has noted, 'all writing, *dialogue* [and] *knowledge creation* is fragmentary, flourishing in webs and comprised of conversations and connections' (Haraway, 1997; reprinted in Haraway, 2003). It thus emerges as a network of democratic possibility.

## 6.2 PLATEAUS OF ORGANISATION.

In the following part of this chapter I look at three different examples of organised networks. The networks that I focus on – the Fibreculture forum/listserve, the Interactivist network, and the Indymedia network – can be seen as contributing to an 'active network culture' that is sustained through my explanation of emergent plateaus of organisation. By moving towards a model of 'plateaus of organisation' I suggest that the radical possibilities of organised networks are multiplied.

### 6.2.1 The Fibreculture listserve.

The critical Internet research forum/listserve Fibreculture is a relatively centralised network, comprising list facilitators, website management and posting guidelines. Fibreculture has been variously described as 'Internet-based discussion groups' and 'forums for the exchange of ideas' (as opposed to one-directional distribution lists) (Lunenfeld, 2000b: 38 – 41). On the server side they are administered by a list program (software to help manage email discussion lists, such as listserve, mailman, SmartList, etc); for participants/subscribers they are accessible through e-mail. Unlike electronic newsletters, which are mailed directly from an organisation, group or individual to your desktop, subscribers can post openly. Going back to the 1960s, electronic lists are considered a relatively low-tech, cheap and accessible way to exchange information and conjecture. One of the earliest systems to employ electronic distribution/mailling lists was the CTSS (Computer Timed-Shared System) computer system at MIT. Developed in 1965, MIT's MAIL was set up to

disseminate administrative messages within a community of network users.<sup>5</sup>

Today, lists such as Fibreculture can perhaps be said to extend a more rigorous sense of 'community' than the functional dynamics of MIT's mailing system, in that the lists or 'threads' initiated are often long-running, generating dozens of mails each day, and frequently sustaining multiple forums simultaneously (see: [www.fibreculture.org/archives/](http://www.fibreculture.org/archives/)). At the same time as defining a sense of 'inclusiveness' and a 'common context' within the listserve itself, this notion of 'community' also calls attention to the intersections both between and across the Fibreculture network, together with their expansion ('networking'). That is to say, a sustainable network culture is one that opens up new threads of conversation, discussion, communication and exchange, thereby extending both the perception of community itself and its sense of its own 'incompleteness'. I think this is expressed quite clearly in the following quote by list enthusiast Aleksander Gubas, who writes that: 'A mailing list should always ask itself what is its sense, purpose and vision . . . otherwise, the networking becomes just another empty and prostituted phrase like multiculturalism, tolerance, democracy, open society', etc.<sup>6</sup>

Established in 2001, Fibreculture is a listserve for Australian Internet culture and research, encouraging critical and speculative interventions in debates concerning information technology, Internet theory, media research, public policy, popular culture, new media education and Internet activism. The Fibreculture list addresses specific 'problems' of sociality, politics and intellectual transdisciplinarity filtered through a void created by established institutions within the cultural industries and the higher education sector – the emergent field of the cultural politics of the Internet. To this end, its critical premiss can be understood as a bringing together of cross-disciplinary interests and subscribers, including artists, theorists, journalists, media producers and activists, in an attempt to renegotiate some of the inflexibility and intractability of academic and media research cultures (Brown et al, 2001). From topics incorporating tactical media activism and network cohesion, theories of 'real time' engagement in the spatio-temporal dynamics of the Net, to the politics of list cultures themselves and the dialectic between theory and practice, the academy and the 'outside', the methodology of the Fibreculture listserve is, I think, most accurately encapsulated in the following passage by the contributors to *Politics of Digital Present* as a

. . . *digital mediology* [which] involves not media nor medium but mediations, namely the dynamic combination of intermediary procedures and bodies

that interpose themselves between a producing of signs and a producing of events. Digital mediology for us, then, is a politics that consists of writing within the media architectonics of an Internet listserve, in the time of the present, in the space of the social . . . [As] a facilitator of open, independent, critical, participatory forums that aim to make a political, social and cultural difference within the socio-technical logic of networks (Ibid.).<sup>7</sup>

The notion of 'mediology' refers to the intersections that function *within* a medium to affect a type of cultural structuring of thought and organisation. In short, a particular way of *thinking* about the affect of the medium itself. Mediology, in the words of Régis Debray, 'would like to bring to light the function of *medium* in all its forms'. Its focus is 'the intervals', the space 'in between': 'the fuzzy zone of interaction between technology and culture . . . between our technologies of memorising, transmission and displacement, on the one hand, and our modes of belief, thought and organisation, on the other' (Debray, 1996: 11 – 12). Walter Benjamin's famous essay '*The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*' ([1935] 2004) is good illustration of mediology. Benjamin's concern in this paper was not whether photography was an 'art', but what the photograph had changed in our conception of art. In particular, he drew attention to the importance of the spatial dissemination of film and its multiple distribution for wide access to the experiences of viewing; to the mediation of the camera in the production of the art object and to the audience subjected to its point of view; and to the techniques of editing – notably montage – in the creation of a sense of 'real time' motion. In Benjamin's essay, mediology can be understood to concern the interaction *within* a system (printed mode of production), the interaction *between* systems (the camera and the art object), and the interactions *across* systems (how the editing process can construct different senses of time and space between audience and producer).

Fibreculture's method of 'digital mediology' can therefore be understood as an extension of this process, writing *within*, *across* and *between* the myriad intersections of the culturally differentiated and cross-disciplinary networks of list subscribers – the artists, academics, journalists and media workers whose spatial scale ranges from anti-corporation networks and Indymedia activists, to networked policy and new media projects (such as the 'Digital Futures Project' and the ARCHiMEDIA research and design project<sup>8</sup>). These 'intersections' call attention to the incommensurability of the environment within which they occur: a 'space' peculiar to the dynamics of listserves and the parallel forums and threads it forms.



In this sense, Fibreculture could be described as always 'emergent', in that the intersections it works through initiate critical debate about *where to go now?* A useful way of thinking about this proposition is to consider the following question: How are criticism, community and conversation enabled? This question is, I think, key to understanding what Fibreculture is 'about'. The configurations of dialogue and exchange of ideas occurs as a 'process' of contribution to topics ongoing or initiated within, across and between the Fibreculture forums, thus affecting a type of 'multilayering' or 'restructuring' of those forums' temporalities and continuities.

Initial observations may lead one to assume the Fibreculture list as serving the function of a Habermasian public sphere, however reconfigured, without intentionally being one. But the very notion of Fibreculture as a public sphere, or as an extension of the idea of a coherent 'sphere of communicative exchange', is, I think, somewhat misdirected. The different threads and forums of Fibreculture do not find synthesis through networks or present a 'solution' that would somehow define a specific new public sphere. Rather, what is novel about the 'arrangement' of the Fibreculture network is the different way in which it calibrates the patterns of communicative exchange and interaction. The 'aim' of Fibreculture, if it can be attributed one at all, is to make possible the organisation of different kinds of content (themes, topics, subject matter) in a necessarily permanent and multiform way. That is not to say that collaborative efforts and different dynamics of organisation (perhaps even 'consensus') are not possible or even desirable. Indeed, I think that the notion of 'organised networks' serves to demonstrate that they are. For instance, as a network for critical Internet and new media research Fibreculture 'lives or dies' on its capacity to generate different kinds of content and conversation, and criticism and knowledge, that would be of service to emergent research areas and projects. But it is to suggest that the 'logic' of networks is one of temporality not fullness; of uncertainty more than permanence; and of continuity rather than consummation. And it is this 'logic' that I think best embodies organised networks such as Fibreculture.

The 'structure' of Fibreculture thus resembles that of an 'emergent plateau of organisation', in that it both sustains the idea of network stability (a collective/connective process of discussion and engagement) and entwines this moment within the uncertainties of networks, including a responsiveness to new forms and institutions of social control (surveillance techniques, censorship, policy decisions and corporatisation). The Fibreculture network is a 'space' *not* of the

presence of validity claims or the actuality of critical reason, but of the inscription of new assemblages and networks of articulation and connectivity. Moreover, it is a 'space' that affirms the idea of network stability ('plateau'), but only to generate a more complex pattern out of it. In this way, Fibreculture may signify a rejection of the formalistic approach of democracy – a Habermasian rationale wherein argument and counter-argument struggle towards synthesis and, with anticipation, consensus – and instead point towards its outline as a network of democratic possibility. The text, dialogue and communication that both differentiates and contextualises the parallel forums of the Fibreculture network comprise an assemblage of links added, posts referred to, and an archive that is at once established and extended as each new thread is initiated/posted/responded to. This recursive, deeper, infinite structure is one that cannot institutionalise or fully guarantee a set of preconstituted, arranged and agreed upon 'outcomes' – the network as 'commons'. Therefore, the challenge for an emergent 'plateau of organisation' such as Fibreculture is to consolidate its processual nature, both by contributing to and multiplying the dialogues, discourses and practices that generate and reproduce new democratic projects. Within the variable logic of networks, the mobility of these 'democratic projects' must in turn be envisaged as an interminable process – breaking down consensus without destroying the [Fibreculture] network itself.

### **6.2.2 The Interactivist network.**

Rather more than a listserve, though just as immersed in ICTs and networks, and hypertuned to their possibilities for challenging new forms of social control, is the collaborative Interactivist Network project ([www.interactivist.net](http://www.interactivist.net)). Comprising a mailing list, an activist communication resource, an independent media project and a technology skills sharing project, the Interactivist network exhibits two principle functions: to generate new dissenting and provocative media projects; and to disseminate information and highlight issues about news worthy events typically overlooked by established media networks. Unlike Fibreculture, the Interactivist network does not have list facilitators. Although the network is built and maintained through centralised servers it uses open source software to provide emergent activist organisations and groups with technology resources to assist in the development of individual and frequently community-oriented media projects. These resources include email, mailing lists, web hosting and a secure chat server

and client, and are made available for appropriation and adaptation according to the issues, communities and projects they are anticipated to address.

A brief example of this is the New York-based 'Collision of Interests' (CoE) site (<http://www.interactivist.net/transportation/index.html>), which is produced through the Interactivist Network's 'skill share' initiative. Expanding on the techniques of movements like Reclaim the Streets and Critical Mass, CoE is an activist site that critically reflects upon the increasing impact of the car on the collapse of public space. Traffic congestion, the atomisation of community, car-related fatalities, the distortion of the industrial landscape, cultural rootlessness and alienation – all of these effects are perceived by CoE as arising from the pre-eminent position accorded the private automobile. As the car becomes evermore emblematic of the kind of anti-social tendencies that capitalism growingly seems to cultivate, the CoE site provides an opening for discussion forums, video activism, links to related issues/sites, postings of essays and reports on local concerns and initiatives to reclaim public space from the privatised sense of the urban dominion of the automobile. In this manner, it can perhaps be considered as an attempt to deconstruct the neoliberal program that currently considers the planet as its own space to be marketised and commodified in its own image for the needs of a 'flexible economy' (Mertes, 2003; Opel and Pompper, 2003). Through the development of a website addressing local issues that may have national and/or international implications, CoE provides a good illustration of an Interactivist project that aims to raise awareness of, and to challenge at a local level, the ways in which 'leisure time', 'activity' and 'public space' is increasingly subordinated to the credence of the market and the realm of private interests.

The CoE project is one example of a politics that can be said to build on the Interactivist Network's stimulus of 'community-based activism'. Through the adoption, adaptation and utilisation of new media and technology to invigorate public dialogue, establish new networks of 'connectivity' and to inform current debates both within and across communities – both local and global – this expansive network[ed] culture can perhaps be said to provide the conditions within which another politics can emerge. This 'other' politics is, I suggest, one that calls attention to the tensions, intersections and moments of connectivity that are the *sine qua non* of the non-linear network dynamics – a politics and culture without a centre. It is a politics, as Hassan writes, whose



. . . interconnections are many, varied and growing . . . form[ing] a network of networks that stretches from the local to the global and is held in tension through the common goal of opposing the rule of neoliberal globalisation . . . [perhaps] taking the first steps toward overcoming the central political dilemma that [Michael] Hardt identifies: the tension between the 'national sovereignty' activists and the 'alternative globalisation' activists. The key, it seems to me, are the ICTs themselves and their potential to reconcile these positions by being able to be both local and global at the same time (Hassan, 2004: 124).

While acknowledging Hassan's portrayal of new forms of activism as contributing to a 'network of networks' that intersect the local and the global, his assertion that ICTs configure a reconciliatory tool between 'national' and 'global' political activists belies the complexity of the nonlinear network dynamic. In part, certainly, one may view the Interactivist network within this outline, providing a platform for, as well as a resource to assemble, a network architecture that enables community activist organisations to engage in dialogue across a 'global' commons – a 'networked civil society', as Hassan suggests in the final chapter of his book. But the term *reconcile* has irreducible overtones of 'evening out' and 'overcoming', which in turn implies the accession of a consensus concerning both the deployment of ICTs within assured regimes of action and the preconstituted positions through which such agency is affected. Accordingly, rather than extending the non-linear and variable characteristics of network[ed] culture, Hassan, following Hardt, runs the risk of lapsing in to a self-certain refrain that is contained within an all-encompassing theory of transcendence and 'smooth' networks. Moreover, any tangible movement towards 'overcoming' the inherent contradictions, tensions and antagonisms of a 'network of networks' may leave one vulnerable to the infinite regress from which it is no longer possible (or desirable) to think critically about the democratic possibilities of networks themselves. These democratic possibilities entail, precisely, criticism, community and conversation at multiple levels of organisation, as emergent networks of politics.

The Interactivist Network's 'Info Exchange' is a good illustration of the multiple situations and dimensions of networked politics. The Info Exchange site is a cooperative effort of radical publishing house Autonomedia and the Interactivist Network ([www.interactivist.net/infoexchange](http://www.interactivist.net/infoexchange)). It organises and provides an open publishing forum that is presented under five list headings: analysis and polemic;

news; reviews; books and events. Through these five sections a diversity of content can be posted and commented on. Recent forum uploads and ensuing discussion threads have included: an obituary on the recent death of Jacques Derrida by Judith Butler; a review essay on the recent (2004) *Crossroads in Cultural Studies* conference at the University of Illinois; a report on the latest European Social Forum in London and its implications for sustainable movement-based political activist networks; and a series of newswires from Haiti reporting on the continuing civil unrest in the country, providing a counter-weight to the brevity of correspondence in the mainstream media.<sup>9</sup> Also included are links to various independent media projects on the Internet (such as the CoE project). These links are automatically updated with content selected and posted by the facilitators maintaining those sites. Registered users/subscribers of the Info Exchange can submit articles and post comments using either their own name, a screen name, or otherwise anonymously. Users are also able to moderate (rate or rank) the content posted to forums. This self-regulating/self-organising process is achieved through the Info Exchange 'editorial collective'. This editorial collective comprises any registered user who is knowledgeable in the subject of a specific forum thread. This might typically include a user who has made a number of posts on a particular subject. It works according to a relatively straightforward process: all leading articles/submissions (comments go up automatically) are posted to the Info Exchange moderators for approval. These are then randomly distributed or 'pooled' to the editorial collective who in turn provides feedback on the article/submission to the Info Exchange moderators prior to its posting. This process of 'self-organising' publishing/moderation can be said to adhere to the four basic design principles as laid out in the Slashdot methodology: to filter out 'noise', or an 'anything goes' mentality; to make the forum as readable, informative and interactive as possible; to limit the amount of time required from any single moderator; and to protect against abuses of power.<sup>10</sup> The intention of the process is therefore to keep subscribers to the Info Exchange within the focus and stated headings of the specific forums while at the same time enabling the continuity and expansion of the discussion threads. In effect, it can be said to provide a sense of editorial consistency that is in many ways analogous to the early ethos of the Nettime discussion forum ([www.nettime.org](http://www.nettime.org)), wherein the 'process' of editing is viewed as key to the creation of a critical [net] dialogue. Pit Schultz, one of the originators of the Nettime forum, describes this process in the following way:

Editing is not just another way of saying that lists, with their inherent tendency to overload an abundance of meaning, should be closed in order to pick and choose the desirable content. Editing here is positively loaded, not as an act of censorship, but as an effort to create a common context, getting rid of the postmodern-liberal 'anything goes' mentality. Here lists are not seen as a neutral forum where everyone can give his or her opinion. They are . . . potentially powerful common context creators.<sup>11</sup>

Expanding on this account of list moderation as a 'positively loaded' process, capable both of creating and extending common contexts of dialogue and dispute, what I think is imperative for the Info Exchange is the extent to which it can sustain a sense of *what it is for/what it is doing?* together with an awareness of the 'politics of antagonism' (Mouffe, 2000). This means, above all, creating and extending a critical/political dialogue within and across the Info Exchange forums that not only acknowledges but positively accommodates the ineradicability of antagonism and the impossibility of overcoming 'conflict creation'. The primary aim of this process is to facilitate the mobilisation of the 'new' and the 'other' by holding in tension those 'common contexts' (as 'plateaus of organisation', or 'moments of politics' as Mouffe suggests (*ibid.*: 101)) within a 'network of networks'. By holding in tension this 'moment of politics' the Interactivist network can thus affect a critical reflection on the nature of the political itself, including the multiplicity of interventions, instances and contexts that produce the 'conflictual conditions' in which new political forms can emerge.

Far from considering the Interactivist network as a reconciliatory space between the local and the global, in the way that Hassan describes, its radical possibilities are in fact manifest precisely because it cannot placate that reconciliatory gesture. As an emergent formation, the Interactivist network proceeds to negotiate the tension between 'conflict creating' and 'common contexts' of organisation. The antagonisms and complexities peculiar to the varied and more often than not incommensurate situations of networks can, in this way, be accounted for 'agonistically', as 'moments of democratic possibility'. That is to say, despite the dissonances and complexities that characterise the nonlinearity of networks, the Interactivist network is defined by – perhaps more than anything – its organisation of relations between activists, information, practices, interests and socio-technical systems. The relations between these terms may manifest themselves at an entirely local level (such as the CoE project), or they may traverse a range of



scales, from the local to the national and the regional to the global (as is illustrated through the Info Exchange forums). However, this context of organisation does not entail the resolution or reconciliation of those relations. Rather, it underscores the intersections and tensions between them as the 'source' of democratic politics, with a diversity of sites or 'plateaus' where relations of power and resistance are articulated in specific local, regional and national configurations. Therefore the Interactivist network is distinguishable as an emergent plateau of organisation, in that it never fully attains universal jurisprudence – as an institution in and of itself – but comprises the outline of a fullness that is irreconcilable and hence always 'to come'.

### 6.2.3 The Indymedia network.

In the preceding sections I have drawn attention to the dynamics of listserves and open publishing forums as examples of what I have referred to as 'emergent plateaus of organisation'. In this section I want to look at a further paradigm of open publishing in the form of the Indymedia network ([www.indymedia.org](http://www.indymedia.org)). The Indymedia network (or Independent Media Centre/IMC) is a network of collectively run media outlets that sustain an 'alternative' open-publishing media platform for news, issues, actions and analysis reporting on grassroots, non-corporate, non-commercial social justice, environmental and political issues. Although I have spoken in my third chapter about the problems inherent in the 'alternative' register, the term is useful in the context of Indymedia as it allows us to establish the differential manner in which content is generated that sets it apart from more conventional (mainstream) forms of news gathering, production and distribution.

Prior to the advent of the Internet and the World Wide Web, most large corpuses of content were closed publishing systems. In a closed system there is a central authority who acts as a gatekeeper for publishing into the system. The gatekeeper typically verifies the quality of the content, and vouches for it. The gatekeeper model is traditionally how mainstream media networks like CNN, NBC and Sky News operate, filtering, selecting, editing and coordinating the running order of content according to certain perceived and perceivable news values (Curran, 2000, 2002). In contrast, the Indymedia network is an open publishing system that is maintained by a nonlinear network of media activists, volunteers and groups. In an open publishing system such as Indymedia anyone can publish content into the network without having to go through a central gatekeeper: contributors are free to

upload whatever they choose, from articles and reports (text, video, audio) to announcements and appeals.<sup>12</sup> Contributing an article to the Indymedia network is, along these lines, no more difficult than using the Hotmail service – you type your article into an online form and then click on a tab to submit it. Further, in an important use of the conversational and interactive dimensions of the Internet, each article includes an option that allows others to contribute their follow-up comments, potentially reframing each post as a catalyst for an online dialogue and intersection of ideas and struggles, such as the anti-corporate/globalisation movements (Couldry and Curran, eds. 2003).

The first IMC was established in Seattle for the WTO events of November 1999. Occasioned, for the most part, by discontent with mainstream media networks, including the decline in 'hard news', the growth of info-tainment and advertorials, concentration of ownership and the increasing conformity of viewpoint and containment of critical debate (McChesney, 2002), the Seattle IMC concentrated on providing a diversity of Seattle reports in all formats through the innovative use of a completely open publishing system. This enabled anyone with an Internet connection to upload either text, still images, audio or video files on to the Indymedia network's newswire. With actions spanning several days individuals could directly communicate, document and share their experiences on the website, building not only one of the most extensive records of political dissent, but also providing an invaluable plateau of organisation amidst the chaos and spectacle of Seattle itself.<sup>13</sup>

In the ten months succeeding Seattle, a network of more than 30 IMCs had been set up, all of them utilising the same freely circulated software. By March 2002 there were more than 70 IMCs. IMCs have also been established for further one off events, such as May Day in London, and as part of longer term, localised political campaigns, from Palestine to Nigeria, from Jakarta to Ecuador. The Brazilian IMC, for instance, puts forward ground level analysis of South American trade issue in a choice of three languages, while the Israeli and Palestinian IMCs extend local accounts of continuing conditions in the West Bank and Gaza (Meikle, 2002). Since the impact of the initial IMC in Seattle, Indymedia has become arguably the fastest expanding alternative media network in the world, with 112 websites/centres across six continents as of April 2003 – the most recent addition being IMC Iraq (Notes from Nowhere, ed. 2003). The common context that appears to connect most of these media projects is the organisation of open networks to which anyone

can contribute – not only a condensed media elite with their particular (often commercially oriented) interests, guidelines and controls. Through a rethinking of the classic divide between professional producers and situated audience, many issues, discussions and conditions that may have previously been overlooked or ignored by corporate media networks potentially become visible and available through the dispersed IMC model.

However, the presumption of a dispersed 'oppositional' or 'alternative media network may present supplementary challenges in terms of the 'consistency' of content of IMCs themselves. For instance, long-time activist and media producer Michael Albert has commented that the IMC network is an 'amazing and glorious outgrowth of the anti-[corporate] globalization project' ("New Targets") (Albert, 2002). Yet this same observer, as well as IMC founders and volunteers at both the local and global levels, need also to acknowledge that there are significant questions to consider in any debate concerning Indymedia's arrangement as a viable 'alternative' to what one might straightforwardly call the mainstream media. It is one thing to conceive an 'open' media network that is grounded in the principles of self-management, solidarity and communicative democracy. However, it is quite another thing to sustain it. Thus, this question of 'consistency', which is indubitably tied to the notions of 'sustainability' and 'longevity' that have typically escaped the 'carnavalesque' endeavors of many so-called anti-capitalist/corporate activists (Starr, 2000), encapsulates precisely the tensions that are inherent within the nonlinear dynamics of networks.

For example, without a central 'quality control' mechanism or 'gatekeeper', IMCs may be disposed to exhibiting a wide variation in the quality of content that is posted. Such systems may inevitably run into the problem that a significant proportion of the content uploaded is of an indifferent quality, and therefore perhaps easily discarded. This is a predicament that confronts various open publishing systems. One of the criticisms leveled at the practice of Blogging, for instance, relates to the sheer banality of content that makes up many personal 'weblogs' and their elevating of the 'daily me' effect – extending the ideas and opinions of individuals rather than engaging these in a dialogue and a textuality that encourages others to contribute and to disagree (J. Hall, 2001). A further, perhaps more pressing problem, is the extent to which this may affect an almost unconscious ability on the part of contributors to an open publishing system to filter out what for them is 'bad news' – opinions, viewpoints and ideas that perhaps do



not correspond with their own. For instance, the 'content' of the IMC networks tend to address opposition to global corporations and the relentless itinerancy of global capital rather than to *all* aspects and intricacies of a 'striated' globalisation, including its multiple political, social and cultural implications (Massey, 2005: 163 – 4). In view of that, one question that I think needs to be considered in relation to the Indymedia network, alongside its relationship to the anti-corporate/globalisation movements, is the extent to which it can be said not only to engage but also to positively accommodate the tensions and antagonisms that comprise the nonlinearity of network culture. That is to say, between private opinion, on the one hand, and the 'scattered' social dynamics of lists, newsgroups and forums on the other; and between isolation and hyperindividuality and the 'closed' atmosphere within communities, collectives and movements.

An open publishing network that is a) accessible to anyone, and b) calls attention to that networks' intractable imbrication within the varied and nonlinear situations of networks, might on the surface seem antithetical to the dual themes of consistency and sustainability. But this perceived incompatibility can be thought about in another way. Rather than as an impasse that needs either to be rendered prostrate or else reconciled within a specific political discourse ('multitude', 'global civil society', 'commons' and so on), it should be understood as an initiating point in the service of new modes of organisation. By bringing the themes of [network] openness and variability and sustainability and organisation to the fore, and refusing to suppress their dissonances, it is possible to develop a new relation of agonism that allows us to *think* and to *engage with* the diverse political situations of networks. The simple exhortation of networks as open, nomadic and inclusive (a criticism I levelled both in this and in earlier chapters in relation to Lessig, Rheingold and, to certain extent, Hardt and Negri and Hassan as well) can itself become a self-aggrandising and complacent ideology – which would make the Indymedia network into the very thing that it would least like to be. In other words, it would mean that the Indymedia network remained ignorant of the actual things it is perceived to challenge: the polarization of dialogue and debate, the determination of specific news agendas, the perpetuation of consensus as a way of sustaining the mainstream/alternative binary and so on. However, the assertion that Indymedia should be open, inclusive, indefinable, and so on can still be advanced, I would suggest, but only as a *problematic* and ultimately *unresolved* critical ideal. The radical possibilities of the Indymedia network turn on in its *critical* capacity to engage the diverse political situations of networks as *conditions of possibility*.

Thought about in this way, the 'politics' of Indymedia can be understood as those which attempt to establish emergent plateaus of organisation in conditions which are always potentially conflictual, since there is this unresolved dimension of antagonism. The outline of emergent plateaus of organisation provides a mutable architecture in which the political situations and 'spaces' of the Indymedia network (the forums and topics, subjects and questions and dialogues and discussions that mobilise the dimensions of argumentation, antagonism and dispute) can be temporarily arrested within the continuum of 'networks upon networks'. Ultimately, what is at stake in this portrayal of the Indymedia network is its ethico-political potential – that is, its continual capacity to negotiate the antagonisms that underpin sociality in networks *and* to sustain them as the very conditions necessary in order to keep the question of democratic politics open.

To set this call for the Indymedia network to be understood as an 'emergent plateau of organisation' in a practicable context, one might consider the following illustration. Today, four years after the anti-WTO actions in Seattle, there are more than 100 IMCs on all continents. The dispersed IMC model can be seen as holding this collective of websites together, building new alliances between people, places ideas and activists, and potentially creating their own sustainable independent media networks. The 'global' Indymedia network is based on openness and broad participation: all software is open source, most lists and forums are publicly archived, and anyone can sign up to the various email lists, log-on in chatrooms, share resources through the Indymedia 'Twiki' system, or publish articles on the newswire.<sup>14</sup> However, Indymedia is more than simply a collective of websites hyperlinked to a number of servers dispersed across the globe, with individuals and groups uploading content to open publishing sites. It is not just about filling in a form and sending it to the IMC; and it is not really about setting up 'another' server. According to Jeff Perlstein, one of Indymedia's originators in Seattle, '[it] is about changing paradigms . . . [and] about learning more from each other'. Indymedia is a network that would like to be both 'powerful and vibrant', and at once 'physically apparent and virtually connected'. He suggests in an interview that:

Since Seattle, when people collaborate for these big manifestations, the resources also come together, we document it, build an alternative, and then some of those resources stay behind, so we're building all these points in this dispersed network . . . Although we are all linked by this website, Indymedia.org, there's a real emphasis on reclaiming space for ourselves,

for people to interact and come together and dialogue and exchange, and that can happen in the virtual realm . . . and in physical locations that are linked by this virtual connection (Notes from Nowhere, ed. 2003: 230 – 42).

This notion that Indymedia creates a distinction between virtual connections and yet can draw a variety of 'physical' contexts into its own unique experience, can, I think, be understood through the relationship it establishes within and across dispersed 'networks of networks'. Networks of networks are, above all else, problematic – converging and coming apart at different levels of organisation. And they lack, by virtue of their dispersed composition, a set of standards that would define them exclusively. Moreover, this has implications of an almost 'free for all' situation, leading to the inevitable accusation that the sheer 'scale' of the Indymedia Network (112 IMCs on the last count) is antithetical to its critical/political possibilities. A 'coming together' of dialogue and exchange is all well and good, but what about the differences and dissensions of dialogue, where communication and interaction may 'come apart'? The above citation from Perlstein fails to acknowledge or make space for the problematical nature of network formations, particularly dispersed networked forms such as Indymedia and the IMC model. This is significant because the differences, dissensions and antagonisms that comprise networks of networks are, as I have suggested, crucial to the definition and mobilisation of new modes of [network] organisation as 'networks of democratic possibility'.

To challenge the assertion that Indymedia is narrowly configured around a specific paradigm – be it anti-capitalism, anti-corporatism or 'alternative globalisation' – I therefore suggest that the Indymedia network and the nascent 'local' IMCs should be viewed as emergent plateaus of organisation. This refers precisely to the way in which such networks are never fully constituted, but rather are sustained through their continual capacity to negotiate the many emergent struggles and practices they may comprise as new networks of possibility. In this sense, the Indymedia network can be said to affect a kind of 'de-standardisation' of the processes of publishing and distribution, reconfiguring the routine separation between producer and receiver, mainstream and alternative, consensus and conflict, and so on, while at the same time organising relations between, and coalescing a consistency across, the uneven spatio-temporal dimensions of networks. Thinking about the Indymedia network in terms of its *de-standardisation* is one way to avoid the political and theoretical impasse that consists in conceiving its service merely as an 'alternative' network form. As I suggested earlier, the Indymedia network isn't about



setting standards per se or reconciliation through deliberation (i.e. consensus), but more so concerns the building and shaping of new networks of possibility at different levels of communication and organisation. These different levels of communication and organisation can be seen in the form of local IMCs, who arrange their own editing and posting guidelines and have the autonomy within a 'network of networks' to respond to national concerns, laws and cultural norms. These local IMCs thus point towards 'emergent plateaus of organisation' both within and across an uneven and dispersed network culture that may be asserted and felt at any level of scale, from:

**IMC Palestine:** Our mission is to help Palestinian activists organise, motivate and inform. We want to help people develop the art of story-telling and debate. We want to be a catalyst for those stories to reach into other media and parts of the planet. We want to breakdown barriers and encourage the flow of information from people with both good and bad stories to tell; to the people we know are out there who want to hear them. We want to create a space that creates a sense of achievement and reflection but is vibrant and open enough to attract people who are interested in activism . . . (<http://jerusalem.indymedia.org/>)

And:

**IMC Ecuador:** In our country the mass media are private monopolised corporations; as a logical consequence they only inform about notices of their interest, not informing about actions of the majority of Ecuadorians. These days, knowing [the] objectives/aims of Indymedia . . . we found it necessary for Ecuador to join power to create IMC Ecuador. Indymedia is the space of communication, which will help us to inform people about our feelings, thoughts, proposals, actions and mobilisations like indigenous, campesinos, urban, popular, and other movements of Ecuador (<http://ecuador.indymedia.org/>).

To:

**IMC UK/IMC 'Kollektives':** Indymedia UK covered the Mayday 2000 actions in London and other places in the UK on a manually maintained website and introduced some fresh approaches to reporting large actions –

most importantly the 'public access terminals' physically situated in the middle of the action . . . people in London established their own open publishing site running on Active Code as part of the global IMC network, and began to report on other actions . . . a countrywide Indymedia centre had to be based on a network of local IMCs running their own site on a shared database. IMC UK became IMC United Kollektives.<sup>15</sup>

The potential of Indymedia is, I think, to contribute to the expansion of a *radically* dispersed network culture that holds open the capacity to work in extremely local ways but also in genuinely international ways. What matters is the interweaving of these things: the fact that this is an emergent culture that is at once dispersed and partially convergent, capable of being asserted at different levels of communication and organisation. Whatever the 'scale' might be, these levels or 'plateaus of organisation' are, I suggest, a decisive influence in conditioning the possibility of certain kinds of democratic politics. Not simply a politics that brings new voices and perspectives to the network, creating more diverse content and dialogue (i.e. an 'alternative' CNN). But the ways in which these nonlinear intercessions of communication and exchange can affect the conditions in which new modes of politics and organisation can emerge. IMCs, and indeed open publishing networks more generally, are not about the institution of rationally derived standards or the imposition of a fixed form. Rather, they are about rethinking *standardisation* at all levels. Most of all, this concerns the interminable invention of a network culture that I assert is grounded in a new relation of agonism, one that is capable of challenging new forms of power and control without destroying the ideals of organisation (in a context of conflict and diversity) and the mobilisation of 'other' forms of community as 'networks of democratic possibility'.

#### 6.4 CONCLUSION: TOWARDS A NEW RELATION OF AGONISM.

In what is a combination of all three illustrations of organised networks as emergent plateaus of organisation, the preceding cases hold open the potential for defining a new 'agonistic' relation of politics. This new relation of agonism that I describe is, like Chantal Mouffe's appraisal, about breaking down consensus without limiting the radical possibilities of organisation and communicative exchange in a context of [network] diversity and unevenness (2000). However, whereas Mouffe's account of an 'agonistic' relation of politics strives to 'go beyond' liberal consensus and deliberative modes of democracy', I take this challenge further, and present the

radical possibilities of new 'agonistic' relations given shape and mobility by emergent plateaus of organisation. The 'focus' of these agonistic relations is to define new 'spaces' or 'networks of possibility' wherein a plurality of interests, discourses, articulations and practices are capable of being addressed – not with the intention of transcendence ('global multitude') or consensus ('commons'), but with the aim of negotiating the incommensurabilities and antagonisms that are internal to the formation of new socialities, new technics of relations and organisation in networks.

In order to address in specific ways the multi-vocal problematic of 'agonistic politics' in networks I have considered Rossiter's (2004) description of 'organised networks' as 'new institutions of possibility'. However, while I share Rossiter's account of organised networks as providing a means to explore the potential of new democratic forms of organisation, I also argued that to describe these emergent modes of organised networks as 'institutions' is too politically restrictive. I therefore proposed that the model of network stability suggested by organised networks is better understood in terms of 'emergent plateaus of organisation'. I claimed that the notion of emergent plateaus of organisation provides a more mutable architecture than the edifice of the institution, and as such lends itself to a more radical thinking of politics and democracy in networks. I have presented three examples of emergent plateaus of organisation – Fibreculture, the Interactivist networks and Indymedia – and considered them in terms of a recast model of agonistic politics. I suggested that these three cases can be understood as new modes of radical democratic organisation.

However, in order for those radical democratic possibilities to be realised the capacity of the emergent plateau of organisation to sustain and to mobilise new 'networks of possibility' is vital. In different ways, the illustrations of emergent plateaus of organisation that I have presented and argued for in this chapter provide a means to meet this objective. They proceed, precisely, to bring to the fore a relation of agonism that is interwoven with the new situations, understandings and contexts of 'network culture' and the new conditions and challenges it affects. An agonistic relation of politics, as I present it, therefore holds considerable value in making intelligible the radical democratic possibilities of new political forms constituted by and situated within 'networks of networks'.



The dispersed and uneven situations of network culture can take many forms and emerge in different types of relations, from tactical media networks and the anti-neoliberal 'movement of movements', to networks of open communication, publishing and exchange. The novelty of the new agonistic relation of politics that I have proposed is not the overcoming of these differences, or their reconciliation within an established framework (such as Lessig's 'Commons') or through a new political discourse (*pace* Hassan, Hardt and Negri) or indeed as an alternative to some 'named enemy' (Starr, 2000), but the different way in which it is established. I would suggest that this new relation of agonism is established at once *through* and *because of* the uneven conditions of network culture. It is a shifting political outline that puts emphasis on the irreducible alterity that represents both a condition of possibility and a condition of impossibility, holding these dimensions in tension as the starting point of a debate on new technics of democratic organisation.

In the context of dispersed 'networks of networks', the challenge as I see it is to *think* the possibility of other ways of doing things, other relations of organisation, and in turn to consider the potential for the emergence of new forms of politics. This, I suggest, has to do with the invention of new 'spaces' or 'plateaus of organisation' that enable, precisely, a reflection on the complexion of the political dimensions of today's network culture. These emergent plateaus of organisation, communication and association can be described as the *scene* of politicality (the setting for new agonistic relations of politics), and once they are located in a *stabilising* capacity they comprise the basis of democratic organisation in all its settings. This is not to suggest that, in and of themselves, these components of networks somehow automatically result in democracy. For example, the Indymedia network is not necessarily 'democratic', if by that term we mean something approaching a continual stability or a non-exclusive network culture. And the Fibreculture listserve cannot be discerned as an *unconditional* ideal of an 'open' network – all things to all contributors. As both Chantal Mouffe and Jacques Derrida have argued, stabilisation is only necessary because there is instability and antagonism. Thus, every stabilisation appears as a plateau; a 'moment of stability and meaning that temporarily organises the unstable and the chaotic *dimensions of networks*' (cited Mouffe, 1996: 9, 84 – 5; emphasis added). Rather, it is to suggest that the antagonistic relations between contexts of stability and the nonlinearity of dispersed networks provide the conditions for the creation of new modes of democratic organisation. The cases of emergent plateaus of organisation that I have discussed in this chapter make available the means to account for and to think

about methods of radical democracy in terms of dispersed 'networks of possibility'. By continuing to negotiate the uneven and antagonistic conditions that comprise dispersed networks, these plateaus of organisation suggest examples of emergent network stability in which the possibility of the democratic can both be thought, practiced, questioned, recast and understood in a potentially illimitable way.

<sup>1</sup> Expansive intellectual property laws, such as the Induce Act in the US (which, if passed, will outlaw the development of peer-to-peer software), and the surveillance and investigative powers of the Patriot Act in the US are two examples that Lessig talks about in his 2004 book. See, *Inducing Infringement of Copyrights Act of 2004* (<http://www.publicknowledge.org/issues/induce-act/>) and the USA Patriot Act (<http://www.eff.org/patriot/>).

<sup>2</sup> Microsoft .NET Passport is a Web-based service designed to make signing in to websites fast and simple. Passport enables participating sites to authenticate a user with a single set of sign-in credentials, eliminating the need for users to remember numerous passwords and sign-in names (<http://www.microsoft.com/net/>). Liberty Alliance offers federated identity to businesses, governments, employees and consumers (<http://www.projectliberty.org/>).

<sup>3</sup> <http://creativecommons.org/learn/licenses/>.

<sup>4</sup> For an example of this see the text archive of media theorist and activist Geert Lovink. All the content of Lovink's website is governed by a Creative Commons License (<http://laudanum.net/geert/>).

<sup>5</sup> David S. Bennahum, 'The Hot New Medium is . . . Email', *Wired* 6, no. 4 ([www.wired.com/wired/archive/6.04/es\\_lists\\_pr.html](http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/6.04/es_lists_pr.html)).

<sup>6</sup> Aleksander Gubas, 'The Flock of Netgulls', posted to the Nettime – English language – list on 23/05/2001 ([www.nettime.org/archives.php](http://www.nettime.org/archives.php)).

<sup>7</sup> The contributions to *Politics of a Digital Present* are organised under the topics of Theory, Politics, Policy, Arts and Education. The particular illustrations I have used in the prelude to this quotation include, respectively: Guy Redden, 'Grassroots and Digital Branches in the Age of Transversal Politics'; McKenzie Wark, 'Abstraction'; Anna Munster, 'Net Affects: Responding to Shock on Internet Time'; and Molly Hankowitz and Danny Butt, 'Fibrous Amigos: The Critical Pursuit of Difference'.

<sup>8</sup> Digital Futures Project regarding the impact and use of Internet by citizens, nationally ([http://www.digitalcenter.org/pages/news\\_content.asp?intGlobalId=125&intTypeId=1](http://www.digitalcenter.org/pages/news_content.asp?intGlobalId=125&intTypeId=1)). ARCHIMEDIA is a research and design collective examining the overlap between media, architecture and public space (<http://archimedia.sytes.net/home.htm>).

<sup>9</sup> The respective threads were posted to the Info Exchange site on the following dates: Judith Butler, 'On Jacques Derrida' 25/10/2004: <http://info.interactivist.net/article.pl?sid=04/10/251241241>. Review essay of the Crossroads in Cultural Studies conference, University of Illinois, June 2004: <http://info.interactivist.net/article.pl?sid=04/10/02/2021233&mode=nested&tid=9>. 'Territory and Deterritory: Inside and Outside the ESF, new movement subjectivities' 29/10/2004: <http://info.interactivist.net/article.pl?sid=04/10/291410226>. 'Neighbours Say Haitian Cops Killed at least 10 People in Capital' 28/10/2004: <http://info.interactivist.net/article.pl?sid=04/10/281611232&mode=nested&tid=13>.

<sup>10</sup> The Slashdot news forum was sold by its creators to OSTG (Open Source Technology Group). It is still, however, maintained – albeit with a broader infrastructure – by many of the same moderators. See Slashdot FAQ at <http://slashdot.or/faq/>.

<sup>11</sup> Pit Schultz, Introduction to Nettime (draft) 'Media, Art, Economy?' Posted to the Nettime English language list on 07/04/1998 (<http://www.nettime.org/archives.php>).

<sup>12</sup> Although Indymedia has no central editorial process, uploads on to the network can be removed if they are considered to be off topic. These posts are not eliminated entirely but are instead reposted in a separate section. See also Indymedia newswire open posting guidelines: [www.indymedia.org.uk/en/static/editorial.html](http://www.indymedia.org.uk/en/static/editorial.html).



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<sup>13</sup> According to Indymedia's own records, the Seattle IMC received over 1.5 million hits in the first few days of it being set up. For an extensive catalogue of the 'events' of the Seattle WTO protests, see Alexander Cockburn et al (2000) *Five Days that Shook the World: the Battle for Seattle and Beyond*, London: Verso.

<sup>14</sup> The Twiki resource is a content management system that works like an open-access website. See the Indymedia *Documentation Project*.  
<http://docs.indymedia.org/view/TWiki/WelcomeGuest>.

<sup>15</sup> IMC Kollektives in London, Manchester, Scotland, Liverpool Leeds, Cambridge, Sheffield and Bristol: <http://www.indymedia.org.uk/en/regions/>. See also, Notes from Nowhere, ed. 2003: 228 – 9.

## CONCLUSION.

The aim of this thesis is to critically investigate the nascent practices of politics and political activism enabled by the proliferation of ICTS, using the ideas of post-Marxism as a basis for generating new theories of radical democracy. The focus of this thesis is specifically on the emerging forms of 'networked' politics or 'cyberactivism', especially those associated with groups like CAE and the EDT, anti-corporate/capitalist activism and with practices such as open publishing and P2P. Over the course of this thesis I have described some of the ways in which these new kinds of political expression enable new modes of communication and organisation, and practice and activism, and how these hold open the possibility of 'other' ways of thinking about politics and radical democracy in an increasingly 'networked' society.

The socio-political developments of an increasingly networked society are giving shape and impetus to new modes of communication and organisation, which in turn are mobilising new relations of power and politics. At the same time, these developments are contributing to, and presenting new challenges for, the ways in which we think about and understand politics and democracy. The case was made, in both parts 1 and 2 of this thesis, that this new thinking of politics represents a break with more traditional forms of democratic political struggle. It entertains the notion that politics does not simply consist of parties, opposition, 'legitimacy' through governance and institutionalisation and the production of rationally-derived policies. Today politics is characterised in a host of different and often incompatible ways, through the (dis)organised, decentralised and nomadic forms that characterise the nascent wave of 'networked' politics.

The overall argument that I have put forward is that Laclau and Mouffe's post-Marxist theory of politics is of value as a means of meeting the outlined challenge. Firstly, it provides a means of accounting for new forms of political subjectivity. It provides a way of representing those forms of subjectivity that does not limit the ways in which they can be thought and conceived. This framework foregrounds the diversity of overlapping and divergent subjectivities (as opposed to a single, predetermined subjectivity) in any social formation and seeks to account for their articulation in 'agonistic' rather than moral terms. Secondly, Laclau and Mouffe's post-Marxist theory makes available an outline of 'agonistic' democratic politics that incorporates a potentially illimitable compass of new political subjects of change.

This outline entails the propagation of the category of radical democracy. Laclau and Mouffe describe a radical democracy as that which opens up new positions of speech, empowering previously excluded groups and enabling new dimensions of social life to become part of the political process. Thirdly, on broader scale I suggest that the category of radical democracy provides a mutable architecture that grants us the space in which to think politics and democracy in other ways. I have argued that the category of radical democracy enables and, through its 'agonistic' structure, actively extends scope for a reflection on the nature of the political and the democratic. This continual questioning of the political and the democratic, facilitated through a radical democratic outline, provides scope for the mobilisation and articulation of new radical democratic imaginaries.

The thesis I advance therefore undertakes to carry some of the critical insights of post-Marxist theories of politics and post-structuralism over to the domain of the ICTs. I have engaged this approach in relation to the emerging theories of network culture, articulated in a number of ways by Terranova, Hassan, Rossiter, Lovink, Meikle, Poster, Hardt and Negri, and considered the radical possibilities of an interdisciplinary methodology which can both account for, as well as add to, the extension of new cultures of democratic politics. I also suggested that such an approach is critical if we are to understand and open out the terrain of present-day democratic politics. This is, of course, in line with the methodology put forward in my first chapter, and introduced again in this conclusion, which outlined the appropriateness of the proposed interdisciplinary approach and its centrality to my thesis.

I identify three crucial areas in which this methodology has proved to be effective. Firstly, it has opened up an original way of engaging the theory of radical democracy in relation to the nascent practices and theories of politics and activism enabled by the ICTs, thus establishing a new theoretical paradigm that provides a basis for rethinking democratic politics in the contemporary era. Secondly, the ancillary fact that I consider the category of radical democracy as essentially *undecidable* and in no way 'fixed' or 'permanent' has given scope for, on the one hand, a reflection on the nature of the political and the democratic, and on the other hand, a 'hyperpoliticisation' – investigating the political dimensions of the ICTs and network cultures, and exploring what new forms of communication and organisation might mean for our understanding of politics and democracy. And thirdly, the outlined methodology has enabled me to question the radical democratic



possibilities of these 'other' kinds of politics, and whether they hold out the potential for democratising society by opening up the traditional paths and codes of politics and democracy themselves. The 'repoliticising' locus of radical democracy can therefore be understood through that category's capacity to recast its foundations relative to new conditions, relations and political forms.

These emergent political forms (such as those outlined in chapters 4, 5 and 6) suggest the potential for generating new theorisations of radical democracy. I showed how this was so by drawing attention to the crucial role of the political practices and cultures associated with the spread of technologies like the Internet in shaping a radical democratic response to the complex challenges of globalisation, informationisation and neoliberal capitalism, and to our understanding of social change. I related these new cultures of politics to explorations of tactical media networks, P2P technology and dynamics of open publishing and list cultures, which I suggested could in turn be linked to a more radical questioning within political and cultural theory about the relationship between the ICTs and the mobilisation of new kinds of radical democratic cultures of politics.

Subsequent to this I have identified a number of specific, though interrelated, areas that correlate with my rethinking of radical democratic politics.

The first concerns my articulation of a new relation of agonism. The proposed new agonistic relation draws on Mouffe's distinction between 'politics' and 'the political'. 'The political' refers to the dimension of antagonism that is constitutive of different social relations. While 'politics' denotes the set of practices and procedures through which this dimension of antagonism can take an 'agonistic' form (Mouffe, 2005: 8 – 9). Following Mouffe, the new relation of agonism that I describe consists in attempting to establish a sense of stability and organisation in conditions which are always potentially antagonistic. In 'agonistic' terms, it is the 'responsibility' of democratic politics *not* to eliminate this antagonistic dimension in order to render possible a rational consensus, but rather to mobilise those differences around democratic values in an 'ongoing confrontation'. However, the variation of the outlined *new* relation of agonism lies in the affirmation of values and relations that is internal to the formation of new socialities, politics and technics of organisation in networks. The primary undertaking of this agonistic relation entails a tripartite methodology: it aims to *negotiate with*, provide a *framework for understanding*, and

to *mobilise* the conditions of political possibility occasioned by the uneven spatio-temporal dimensions of networks.

The second pertains to the way in which this new agonistic relation of politics can generate new meanings and areas of application for the idea of democracy to be radicalised. Underlining this is my contention that the networked ICTs like the Internet do not necessarily 'harness' or 'promote' democratic values and identities according to the same logic by which a hammer is used to embed a nail (i.e. as a linear function). The Internet does not discriminate between values and processes or promote certain practices and rights over others. And it is not a formally instituted and structured public sphere of communicative exchange in the form of a fourth or even fifth estate. Of course, there are a whole range of activities and practices that one might consider 'democratic', 'participatory' and, in some sense, formative instances of a 'new public sphere'. In my third chapter I drew attention to some of the ways in which the Internet clearly does provide interactive 'spaces' where democratic deliberation might burgeon. Usenet facilities, chat rooms, email, listserves and weblogs arguably promote interactive dialogue that might contribute to what Khan and Kellner have suggested are 'vital oppositional space[s] of politics and culture' (2005: 94). One might describe this as the emergence of a new kind of 'public sphere' or 'civil society', fostering resistance and opposition to formal institutions of power through 'novel modes of virtual and actual political communities and original forms of direct political action' (Ibid.: 94). However, as Mark Poster reminds us, this position neglects important differences between proximate speech and life online such as body positioning and the spatio-temporal dimensions of networks (Poster, 2001b). Indeed, as I suggested in my introduction, not only is it the case that the Internet interconnects citizens and subjects across different localities and regions through digital networks, but it also introduces a new register of time and space and a new relation of human to machine, thereby opening out the potential to construct genuinely dispersed political forms that are not tied to previous, territorial powers. However, the issue of the ICTs and new spaces of democratic organisation is an important area of critical debate. Thus, I have argued that the diffuse and nonlinear characteristics of networked ICTs afford new contexts at least for differential organisational spaces to emerge, ones not limited by the western regime of rationality and representation. This, in turn, is giving rise to 'other' languages, relationships and modes of organisation that promote the mobilisation and negotiation of new political forms.

The emergence of new political forms extends the requirement to *rethink* our understanding of notions of politics and of democracy, and how those categories are being recast and redrawn through new inaugurations of space and organisation initiated by networked ICTs. In order to keep the question of politics and democracy open the mobility of these nascent political forms is dependent on their continual capacity to negotiate, and to sustain as conditions of possibility, the antagonistic dimensions peculiar to the varied and frequently incommensurate political situations of networks. This is crucial if we are to envision new political forms being of service in the definition of new democratic imaginaries. For instance, new political forms must go beyond the politics of 'spectacle' and 'short-termism' that is typical of some elements of tactical media that I spoke about in my fourth chapter. I proposed that a deeper understanding of what is at stake in democratic politics would make good this tendency, enabling us to clarify how new political forms can progress in an 'agonistic' manner that is both sustainable and capable of adapting to the demands of organisation in uneven and nonlinear networks.

The foundations for a new relation of agonism therefore entail an adaptation of the 'terms' of radical democracy in order to account for new modes of sociality, communication and politics as they are organised in networks. This adaptation finds its theoretical impetus in the *incomplete* and *undecidable* register of radical democracy – 'democracy to come' – which has been identified as integral to the investigation of new radical democratic imaginaries. This has been broken down into three interwoven constituents.

Initially, I suggest that the outlined new relation of agonism assumes at all times to keep the democratic contestation alive. It does this not merely by accepting to the antagonistic foundations of 'the political', but by actively sustaining and mobilising this antagonistic dimension as both a *condition of possibility* and as a *condition of impossibility*. Located in a stabilising capacity, this agonistic relation thus provides a course through which the possibility/impossibility nexus can be held in tension as the initiating point of a dialogue on different dynamics of politics and organisation. This, in turn, strengthens the means by which to counter what I have identified as the political impasse of certain theories of democratic struggle, such as the 'ever-expanding network form' that is Hardt and Negri's 'global multitude'. Rather than envisioning democratic struggle within a 'sea of networks' that simply 'sweep away' its opponents (Hardt, 2002), the agonistic mode that I describe offers a more



robust, sustainable and, indeed, radical interpretation of democratic political struggle. It enables us to conceptualise the relation between new and different modes of politics and organisation as an on-going series of alliances and articulations, and negotiations and contestations, whose equivalences remain contingent. In addition, the sustainability of new and different modes of politics and organisation – such as I have discussed in this thesis in the shape of tactical actions like ECD and in the form of organisational practices like P2P, digital archives and wikis – provide the conditions within which other configurations of radical democracy can be thought, defined, questioned and mobilised.

This brings me to the third area consistent with my rethinking of radical democratic politics – the emergent plateau of organisation. The emergent plateau of organisation brings nonlinear networks, sustainability and the aims of an agonistic relation of politics together in a way that enables us to define new 'networks of possibility'. The form of emergent plateaus of organisation that I describe provides a *mutable space* in which ideas, actions, tactics and practices are temporarily arrested within the continuum of networks. Rather than taking for granted the 'ever-expanding network' that merely 'sweeps away' opponents, the emergent plateau of organisation brings to the forefront the 'problematical' dynamics of organisation in networks. It provides a means for networks to, in the words of Tom Mertes, 'hold an internal conversation' (Mertes, 2003b: 149). Given the disparities of organisation of networked forms of politics, the attempt to account for those differences (of ideas, actions, tactics and so on) necessitates new agonistic relations in order to meet the challenge of defining and mobilising sustainable networks of democratic possibility. The emergent plateau of organisation instigates a new agonistic relation of politics that, as I have suggested, may operate in a diversity of sites where issues of 'common concern' can be explored. Such 'common concerns' may entail strategically relevant decisions (such as a particular action or objective – i.e. 'what is to be done' in a specific 'local' situation; what political decision/action is required?) or they may comprise the 'sharing' of information, knowledge and digital content for different purposes, for example to make possible new research into emergent areas of political enquiry, as I outlined in chapter five in relation to e-archives. What is vital for the 'sustainability' of these plateaus of organisation is their capacity to address as well as to negotiate those 'common concerns' as ongoing processes. This means, principally, that all values, ideas and ideals are 'up for' negotiation and contestation, and no decision, action or objective is absolute or final. This 'agonistic' confrontation is therefore central to the

definition of emergent plateaus of organisation as new networks of democratic possibility.

The emergent plateau of organisation thus holds open the potential to mobilise new networks of democratic possibility, ones whose political capacities are at once made possible and defined by new combinations of networks. The radical potential of these networks is conditioned through their capacity to negotiate interminably the terrain of social interaction, participation and communication within and across the nonlinear spatio-temporal dimensions of networks. This can be seen in, amongst others, the shape of P2P networks such as eDonkey and Overnet, the form of open publishing networks like Indymedia and Interactivist, and in the mould of listserves like Fibreculture, media centres like Sarai and hypertextual archives like Wikipedia. In different ways, each of these networks demonstrates scope both to organise as well as open out spaces for the contribution, communication, exchange and dissemination of very diverse kinds of content over the Internet: from the circulation of digital music, movie and image files, to the organisation of information, explanation and context and the subsequent course of new regimes of knowledge acquisition, production and communication. Moreover, these examples of organised networks as 'emergent plateaus of organisation' show how multiple situations of network stability can be thought, practised and negotiated in an ongoing and sustainable manner. They therefore provide a means to keep the question of politics and democracy radically 'open'.

In order to *think* radical democratic politics in networks it is necessary to develop in conceptual and practical ways languages for these 'post-representational' forms of democracy. The outlined 'networks of possibility' present new dynamics of democracy in the shape of emergent plateaus of organisation. While these networks can be considered as 'institutional forms' (Rossiter, 2004), in the sense that they retain the capacity to organise social relations, they are radically different to the technics of modern – liberal democratic – institutional forms. Post-representational modes of democratic organisation necessitate new kinds of thinking that go beyond the institutional refrain. They enliven and mobilise the capacity to think politics and democracy in new – potentially illimitable – ways, and thus eschew any constraint to a narrow conception of how and in what ways 'democracy' is [to be] organised. The model of emergent plateaus of organisation that I propose points towards a recast framework of radical democratic politics. Above all, it suggests additional qualities – both dispersed, incomplete and extra-

territorial, as well as situated, focused and project-based – that require attention, examination and explanation if they are to contribute to the promotion and enhancement of new democratic imaginaries.

Collectively, these three salient elements of my rethinking of radical democracy constitute a new paradigm of theoretical enquiry into the nature and potential of new kinds of democratic cultures of politics. It is clear that much additional work will be required in order that a more thorough understanding and appraisal of the nascent political dimensions of ICTs and network culture can emerge. The thesis I present is a step towards playing an active role in that task. It aims to develop the examination and discussion of interdisciplinary understandings, potentialities and alternatives that may comprise the contemporary nature and future of cultural politics. It is hoped that this study will therefore stimulate additional investigation in this field, contributing to the abovementioned areas of enquiry and providing a valuable critical intervention and dialogue concerning the unfolding topographies of politics in the early twenty-first century.



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